

Research Statement

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My scholarly work examines the use and abuse of apocalyptic rhetoric and imagery within tolerant and open societies. While apocalyptic social and religious movements are often seen as a threat to liberal norms of toleration and openness, history suggests that apocalypticism and toleration are not as incommensurable as has often been assumed. I combine the methods of close textual interpretation, rich contextual history, and normative political theory to investigate the place of apocalyptic, millenarian, and chiliastic ideas in the practice of toleration. I draw on early modern sources such as the New England churchman Roger Williams, the poet and novelist John Bunyan, and the egalitarian reformer Gerrard Winstanley to illustrate the promise and peril of apocalyptic politics, advancing an argument for the positive use of a hopeful, yet restrained political philosophy of the apocalypse. This eschatological framework characterized by hope, patience, and certainty plays an essential role in supporting and sustaining the practice of toleration in our own apocalyptic times.

Dissertation: Fear, Hope, and Love: Apocalyptic Faith and the Origins of Toleration.

Many theorists of liberal democracy fear that apocalyptic, millenarian, or ‘other-worldly’ political and religious movements are incapable of supporting or sustaining liberal norms of toleration and openness. Meanwhile, the world has seen a recent resurgence in apocalyptic rhetoric among the religious and secular alike. From the apocalyptic violence of ISIL and Aum Shinrikyō, to eco-terrorism or doomsday predictions of rising tides and rising inequality, we live in a world that remains steeped in end-times fervor. Yet it seems that some forms of apocalypticism are more dangerous than others. At its worst, apocalypticism may represent an existential threat to liberal democracy, foreclosing future disagreement and giving rise to stunning displays of exclusion and intolerance. At their best, however, apocalyptic ideologies provide individuals with critical imaginative and theoretical resources that enable the confident and committed practice of toleration. Drawing on a close historical study of the early modern champions of toleration, I argue for the importance of a political philosophy of the apocalypse. By pairing millennial hope with an ethic of patience, eschatology provides invaluable support for the confident practice of toleration.

The core of my dissertation consists of three historical case studies set in the early modern period. During this time of theological speculation, politics in the early modern Anglophone world took on a distinctly apocalyptic character. This chiliastic public culture subsequently saw the development of modern conceptions of toleration and liberty of conscience. Counterintuitively, the theory of toleration did not emerge primarily as a rejection of apocalyptic politics. Instead, thinkers such as Roger Williams, John Bunyan, and Gerrard Winstanley repurposed apocalyptic imagery in order to justify and sustain the practice of toleration. I place close textual readings of Williams, Winstanley, and Bunyan within rich historical context in order to illustrate the promise and peril of apocalyptic politics, and so help us navigate our own apocalyptic times.

One chapter of my dissertation, forthcoming in *History of Political Thought* as “‘To Hope, and to Wait’: Roger Williams and the Eschatological Roots of Toleration,” places Williams’ distinctive commitment to religious toleration in the context of early Rhode Island, while tracing out the positive

implications of his millenarian eschatology. For Williams, eschatological millenarianism offers the ethical framework necessary to tolerate difference and disagreement “so long as till . . . the end of the world.” Eschatology provides reason for hope, empowering patience by the promise of a future restoration of the church to its apostolic purity. At the same time, he rebukes those who would collapse the eschaton into the present. Rather, the patient practice of toleration is strengthened by the conviction that darkness will not overcome the light, but that good will at long last triumph over evil in a victory wrought not by human hands. Williams’ political theology encourages us to reevaluate the relationship between apocalypse and toleration, while demonstrating the value of eschatological imagery in sustaining toleration while avoiding the excesses of apocalyptic enthusiasm.

Whereas Williams’ eschatology manifests in the language of patience and hope, the social critic, poet, and dissenting preacher John Bunyan instead relies on vivid descriptions of divine wrath and the damnation awaiting unbelievers. While scenes of cosmic justice and hellfire may seem an unlikely source of tolerationist instincts, Bunyan draws from the concept of divine retribution a guarantee that wrongdoing will be punished in the end. In light of this prophesied vindication of believers, unbelievers may be tolerated in the present. For Bunyan, the logic of divine wrath permits vigorous public disagreement within an agonistic public square. Fire-and-brimstone preaching, in particular, takes on a privileged role in the public square as both example of full-throated moral language, and reminder of the eschatological framework that separates human judgment from divinely-authored punishment and enables the practice of toleration.

The third and final case turns to the millenarian universalism of Gerrard Winstanley, leader of a seventeenth century radical egalitarian religious movement termed the “Diggers.” For Winstanley, economic inequality, political domination, and religious persecution all share a common root in the human desire for domination and power. Yet despite the “reign of the dragon” of desire, Winstanley anticipates an imminent divinely appointed transformation of society as Christ returns, “rising . . . up in sons and daughters,” when the Spirit of God—identified throughout as reason—precipitates mass conversion as all are brought into harmony with the truth. This conviction thus bolsters Winstanley’s ethic of toleration: why persecute or punish those who are destined to be our brothers and sisters? Winstanley’s display of confidence in the transformative power of reason stand in stark contrast to the pessimism of many liberal theorists, such as Karl Popper, illustrating the distinctive role that eschatological and epistemic confidence plays in sustaining a commitment to toleration under threat.

Through careful historical and theoretical analysis, I show how these cases demonstrate the potential of apocalyptic discourse to justify, support, and sustain norms of toleration. At the same time, they also demonstrate the pitfalls of certain apocalyptic approaches to politics. An appropriately bounded apocalyptic frame offers a unique and useful approach to the practice of toleration, while avoiding the errors of intolerant activism, tragic agonism, and political pessimism. This project has important implications for political theorists interested in the politics of religion; for scholars of intellectual history; for those who study liberal democratic theory, toleration, and millenarian or apocalyptic movements. I am currently revising the fourth of five chapters, and anticipate defending the dissertation no later than April 2022. Following completion of the doctoral degree, I intend to publish a revised version of my dissertation as a monograph, with additional material on ancient and modern apocalyptic tolerationism.

Future Research

In the early seventeenth century, Gerrard Winstanley posited that inequality and intolerance shared a common root cause, and were thus interrelated evils. I am currently developing a second project that follows this line of reasoning, examining the ways in which inequalities of wealth, status, opportunity, and power shape our capacity to develop the virtues and practices of toleration, and in turn, democratic citizenship. Toleration is a critical means of allowing individuals with different and distinct values and experiences to nonetheless build a common life together. Inequalities, however, may threaten the very existence of a common life by rendering us ‘incomprehensible’ to one another, in turn creating vast gaps in our experiences of the world and diluting our capacity to view our fellow human beings as moral agents, friends, and co-citizens. Moreover, today’s economic and political systems tend to perpetuate inequalities and replace moral reasoning with cold quantitative calculi or cost-benefit analysis, further dampening our capacity to form deep relationships of mutual understanding and mutual affection across difference.

Many scholars throughout the history of political thought have suggested that inequalities of wealth are detrimental to the health of the body politic—from Plato (who termed inequality ‘the greatest of all plagues’ in the *Laws*, to Rousseau, John Rawls, and G.A. Cohen. Few, however, have directly examined the interrelation between inequality and a society’s capacity for toleration as the predicate of liberal democratic citizenship. In addition, my intended project expands beyond the traditional focus on wealth, power, and economic opportunity to examine the exacerbating effects of geographic, educational, and partisan divides. I follow Gerrard Winstanley in identifying a common source for the problems of inequality, intolerance, and incivility. The final section of the project studies the potential of alternative living arrangements and plans of life to counteract the deadening and alienating aspects of modern society. I examine a variety of institutions, including the traditional multi-generational productive home, the utopian agrarian communities of nineteenth century America, and modern communities that provide integrated economic and social functions for their members. These communities—religious, familial, and secular—each offer new potential for building a common life in the face of alienation and alterity.

I am currently involved in several other research projects in various stages of development. One such project consists of a quantitative analysis of the effect of the Senate practice of soliciting “blue slip” reviews of federal judicial nominees on the ideological polarization of the judiciary. Preliminary analysis of the data shows that during times of strengthened blue slip influence (where home-state senators possess greater ability to veto nominations), presidents tend to moderate their nominations when facing senators from the opposite party. This effect, however, is confounded by a strategic effect as presidents correspondingly compensate by nominating ideologically more extreme judges when the threat of blue-slip opposition is low. This finding suggests that the blue slip institution is unlikely to substantially moderate the overall ideological polarization of the judiciary.

Another side project considers the concept of aphoristic writing as applied to the ethics of communication. Drawing on works from the reactionary Colombian aphorist Nicolás Gómez Dávila, Friedrich Nietzsche, Susan Sontag, and Jacques Derrida, I develop an ethical and aesthetic argument for the use of aphoristic writing in philosophical and political dialogue.