

# UnTextbooked

*A history podcast for the future.*

Transcript: [How did tolerance become an American value?](#)

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Guest	Denis Lacorne, PhD
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Gabe Hostin 0:05

I'm textbook producer Karly Shepherd was growing up, she often find herself in groups of people who all have the same values and beliefs.

Karly Shepherd 0:13

So I was raised in the Christian church and I remained pretty active in the church. My inner circle was pretty homogenous, just in terms of religious belief and general values and political orientation, everything that's kind of unofficially tied to religion. I really struggled with the lack of conversation within political spheres.

Gabe Hostin 0:39

Prolly began looking for ways to break out of her bubble. She started talking to people of different religions and politics to understand why Americans are often expected to become rigid partisans. She wondered if this us versus them mentality was something truly new. Or if it had its roots in history. She found the work of Dr. Denis Lacorne, a French philosopher, and the author of the limits of tolerance, enlightenment values and religious fanaticism.

Karly Shepherd 1:05

He kind of introduces two concepts, or two different capacities for tolerance. And kind of draws a line between the concept of toleration and the concept of tolerance with toleration, being something that was utilized by the Catholic Church or more traditional groups. That's kind of a begrudging allowance of diversity, with intention of eventually asserting dominance, whereas kind of leaders of new religious movements, we're promoting a concept of tolerance that steps beyond toleration and promotes genuine welcoming of diversity. And America kind of brands

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itself on being a very tolerant nation. But I've been really curious to establish whether or not America is genuinely tolerance, or is just practicing the act of toleration.

Gabe Hostin 1:57

In this episode of UnTextbooked, Carly Shepherd interviews Dr. Denis Lacorne, about how peaceful societies need to have more than two viable options to succeed and get past him and this isn't textbook stated.

Karly Shepherd 2:14

UnTextbooked Thank you so much for being here. I'm so appreciative, and I definitely admire your work. I've so enjoyed reading your book. And I guess the first thing I'd like to talk about is this distinction between the concept of tolerance and the concept of toleration.

Denis Lacorne, PhD 2:39

Yeah, so I'd make the distinction that toleration is more something which is negative. And in fact, if you look at the Latin root of the term tolerance or toleration, it's trolley row are totally rare rates, a verb in Latin, which means put up with bear burden. It's something which you do, but reluctantly, you can tolerate. Let's say you're sovereign or king or queen. You can tolerate a minority religion, but clearly it's going to be kept inferior. dissenters are not welcome. And if they are welcomed, they'll have to accept the official religion which may be the religion picking. So that's the initial definition and it took many centuries, maybe four, maybe five centuries to move to what I call the modern concept of tolerance, positive tolerance, and positive tolerance is much more than just mere toleration. Positive tolerance means that you accept all religions as equal. There's no hierarchy or no one religion that's dominate, all religions are equally accepted and respected. Even though you may not agree at all with the ethical concept of those other religions or with their conception of the common good, but basically, there's this idea of equality and respect. And that's only possible if you have a political system that has a bill of rights that has a constitution that have a legal order that will make sure that every possible religion is respected. The United States is basically a secular Republic, but in a deeply religious society. Positive tolerance requires plurality of religion. And that's why I'm interested in philosophers like like Voltaire. For instance, Voltaire, who, in his philosophy call letters that he wrote, while visiting England claimed that well, you know, you don't want to have one religion in what country because that would be a despotic that would be tyranny. So ideally, a tolerant society will of course accept many more than one religion, and hopefully respect them all. Equally.

Karly Shepherd 4:59

I've found America's view of tolerance to be a bit unique, the country kind of prides itself on being tolerant and free and welcoming. But in your writing, I was very interested even early on in the foundations of the United States seemed that there were some contradictions in claims to be religiously free and tolerance, you shared the example of John Ruggles who was prosecuted for blasphemy in the early 1800s, after declaring that Jesus Christ was a bastard and his mother was prostitute. And just for for publicly declaring this, the court decided that he could be

prosecuted for blasphemy. This seemed to contradict the First Amendment right to freedom of religion, and kind of introduced that idea initially, that maybe America isn't quite as free and tolerant as is on paper. So this ruling took place a couple 100 years ago, and I'd love your insight kind of on America's view of tolerance historically, but I'm I'm also curious if you think we've made progress since then. And if you think America is kind of the tolerant nation that claims to be and claims to be historically and kind of where we've, where we've transitioned, since that case of John Ruggles

Denis Lacorne, PhD 6:14

Yeah, historically, America for me is an example of what I call colonial tolerance. That is to say tolerance is not widespread. It's not all over you have the intolerant Puritans after all in New England who would expel the Baptist or would expel the the Quakers and kill the witches of Salem. Then you have the extreme tolerance of Pennsylvania, but that's an exception and because the guy was running Pennsylvania, William Penn, a Quaker was by definition tolerant. And then you had for instance, what became known today as New York and New Jersey but earlier was the New Netherlands run by a Dutch director, Peter Stuyvesant, that Dutch director was not tolerated at all. For him. The established church was the Dutch Reformed Church, and he expelled or even arrested Quakers. Even though Quakers tried to to be accepted like a normal religion. So it took a while for the United States to be truly tolerant but it does happen with the American Constitution. And they are very important statements by Jefferson talking to the the Danbury Baptists community or George Washington talking to the Jewish community of Newport, insisting that you know, those religions are equal and equally protected and the state is going to be neutral. It's not going to interfere in financing one religion rather than another and, and that's those are very important statements. So today, what happens today? Well, is the United States. Terms of religious tolerance, a very advance in that domain, I would say, yes. Even though you still have cases that deal with intolerant moments in American history's cases that deal with exemption should you make any exemptions for instance, for a Native American tribe that uses a yachtie in a ceremonial way, and the Supreme Court decided that no, you cannot do that it violates the general law that general law prohibits the use of drugs. But that decision of the Supreme Court has been overturned by Parliament's by legislatures. Another good example, which I don't mention the quote but which is quite interesting, I think from a European perspective, is the century of religion. In Miami, I'd say it mix of Afro Cuban religion that mixes African gods with capitalism, and you have animal sacrifice and not religion. And so the question is should we make an exemption in a in a state Florida, which prohibits cruelty towards animals? And the Supreme Court in that very interesting decision? The Supreme Court says, Well, yes, we should make an exemption because that's part of their tradition, their ritual, however cruel and we should make an exemption because on the other hand, hunting is not prohibited or killing cows is not prohibited in third, I saw in that case, it's not abnormal to make an exemption but if the law was General and prevented all forms of hurting animals, then that would not be an exemption for the Santeria church. And so you see, religious freedom goes very far in the United States. But there are limits to that. And I think the best example is a Trump's ban on visitors from seven Muslim nations that was clearly something that targeted a

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particular religion and most likely violated the First Amendment. So here's an interesting modern example suggesting that well, religious tolerance is far from being achieved, completely achieved in the United States.

Karly Shepherd 10:17

Yeah, is there any society past or present that you've seen that you feel gets tolerance rights in their attitudes and in their policies? Is there a society or community you can think of that is a model of what positive tolerance looks like?

Denis Lacorne, PhD 10:35

Well, with limitations that we talked about, the United States is close to a model. A Britain oddly enough is also close to a model even though it still has an official church, but everything is as if it was a secular society. For instance, there's no ban on the hijab or even the niqab, but the burqa in England, when you go to England, you could get customs agents, custom agents have could wear hijab, that's fine police women could have a hijab, but you certainly would not say that in France, which is much more restrictive and punitive of minority religion but not just any minority religion, newly arrived religion, that's where the limits is, new immigrants are dislike and that's very often where you would see limits of tolerance. But I find it disturbing in the the ban on Muslim that was ordered by Trump. It targets not just a single religion but a relatively relatively new foreign religion that arrived in the United States on the other hand, any United States you have also American born religions, like Mormons or Jehovah's Witness and so on religion that were born and developed in the United States and which are quite accepted today. There's no restriction against those religion. So the United States is more open to existing religions. And by the way to non religion, non believers also accepted as well. There's an equality there and we have many important decisions that are super important that say, you cannot privilege one religion over another, or one religion over non belief, which is very important for us in the United States where non belief is rising very fast, about 30 40% of millennial and younger people in the United States. But if you take a long historical perspective, what's fascinating about philosophers like Locke, Voltaire, like I now wrote the history of the two indies, in France, is that they're very much aware that the West is not this beautiful thing that is tolerant as opposed to a barbarian east. or non West, because the worst wars of religion, for instance, the 30 Years War, which killed between five and 10 million people. Those are the most horrible example in the world that exist and they're much worse than, for example, that you may pick up in the non West. And that's why the modern concept of tolerance, in fact, develop as a reaction against those horrible religious wars that existed, both west but also in a non West with the conquistadores, for instance, or the mistreatment of Indians. At a time people thought that maybe Native Americans did not even have a soul. So those important debates fed the Enlightenment discussion and about what is true tolerance, and it's not with a sword or with fire that you're going to solve problem is about Persuasion. Persuasion is the only weapon you should be able to use and if you disagree with someone else's religion, well try to pursue it him or her that maybe that's something else that's true, but that's the only weapon hence the importance of free speech. Free Speech goes with persuasion and tolerance. And if you want to

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use the sword and the fire to force people to convert, well, you'll never get to get good results. It's going to be a fake conversion and not going to solve any problem at all.

Karly Shepherd 14:26

What do you think our steps are as a society beyond living out tolerance individually? What can we be doing to get closer to that utopia?

Denis Lacorne, PhD 14:36

Well, it's a good question. There are several types of tolerance or my emphasis is on religious tolerance. But there's also something else which I define as multicultural tolerance, which is also something important, which has to do with race, ethnicity, gender, it's a different kind of tolerance, but it's also important as a notion of tolerance. So in the United States, there's progress, but you have other forms of intolerance that are maybe not directly religious, but racial intolerance. The rise of white supremacists in the United States, or even domestic terrorism. That's an extreme form of intolerance, which is not religious, but it's racial intolerance. And that's also something that has to be dealt with. That's why you have religious tolerance but also multicultural tolerance. And maybe religious tolerance is nearly achieved, I would say in the United States with a few exceptions, whereas multicultural tolerance is far from being achieved because of those problems with racism and domestic terrorism. And it's always existed, but the fact that white supremacist, Neo Nazis are still functioning United States is a cause of concern, of course, and they also attack mosques, they attack synagogues. They attack a variety of people who belong to, you know, religious communities. And that's that's a matter of concern, not just in the United States that happens in England that happens in France and Belgium, we have those problems as well.

Karly Shepherd 16:23

So your book was originally published in 2016. Yes, in French, and then was translated and published again in English a few years later, and I found it really eye opening. In your closing remarks. You commented that even in that brief window of time between the publication in French and the publication in English, some events took place that continued to fuel and shape the conversation about tolerance. So then then your English version of the limits of tolerance is published in 2019. And I'd venture to say that even since 2019, we've encountered some issues in our society that have demonstrated a lack of tolerance. So I guess my question for you then is what do you think is our largest current threat to tolerance? What are the limits of tolerance that we are encountering today? I

Denis Lacorne, PhD 17:10

would say that the real danger is not so much tolerance, but it's self censorship. For instance, our typical example there's a very nice book by Jeff Coulson at Yale University Press on the cartoons of Charlie Hebdo, which was so controversial in France and led to the murder of 12 journalists in 2011. So you have this wonderful book that explains the history of the cartoons of Denmark and France and the trials and, and the reaction in different Muslim countries. And yet,

the book decided to publish the text but not the cartoons. So you have a book on cartoons that are never to be seen, which is astonishing and when the cartoons that mocked Mohamed in a shoddy Abdo, the French journal were discussed debated. They were never published in the mainstream press in the United States on the ground that you didn't want to hurt the feeling of this and that religious group. And yet the same media had talked about and publish Peace Prize for instance, which is a mocking work of art, where Christ is dipped in urine of the artists and it's shocking, but that's part of satire. And so just some caricatures are accepted and others are not why this kind of self censorship. Now in the United States, it's it's complicated, of course, because free speech is almost without limit, if you consider the First Amendment public, but if you're a private club or private media or private university, then you can't have restriction of speech or speech codes. But if you're a public university like UC Berkeley, for instance, no, you cannot have limits on speech. However complicated and costly. That is, so in AI states free speech goes very, very far and includes the possibility of mucking over and insulting someone else. As long as violence was not there was not visible, but it's hard to understand of course, and the ultimate limit of free speech is the kind of speech that would immediately and intentionally provoke violence, and then that's the kind of speech you probably want to ban. And that's what happened. For instance, in the Charlottesville, Charlottesville unite the right rally, which brought together Neo Nazis supremacist, armed militia and progressive students and families. The pretext was a statue you know, the lease that Robert Tilly Should we keep a statue in the middle of the city of Charlottesville or not. So here you had people call it violent they had weapons and salted their opponents they use a sticker Netsy songs, and then opponents wanted to block them, the outer clash, and so should such a violent expression of different viewpoints be allowed? And the answer is that well, yes, if you can maintain order, but if you're unable to maintain order, if you don't have a police force that can separate the two camps that said ahead of time that they're going to beat the other one. They're going to have problem and you know what? happened right woman was murdered by a new Nazi Altrider driver murdered on purpose. So that's what you want to avoid. And and is this legal concept of imminent violence. But what does that mean imminent violence? How do you prove that it's imminent to judges that and that's, that's where the problem is, you know, and that's what happened in Charlottesville. There was imminent violence, and yet, local people didn't see it that way. And the capitalist direction. It's another example of protesters they should be allowed to say what they want to say I couldn't challenge the election. But clearly, they went a little beyond so there you have another you know what they say it's fine, even though you may dislike it, but it's part of free speech. But then when they go beyond and use violence to impose your ideas, that's where the problem is. And tolerance basically is trying to it's very hard trying to convince people that violence slogan or violent language or that's fine, but you should not go beyond that. And of course, an outsider may not understand that the subtlety that, you know, a violent term or violent expression doesn't necessarily move to a violent action. I don't believe in the the power of words are so powerful, that certain word will lead to an action. No, it's not as simple as that.

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I think your mention of violence is something super profound, kind of that tolerance and violence don't coexist. I think it's something definitely to be reminded of when we examine limits of tolerance in in modern society. One of my personal favorite things about studying philosophy is it's kind of reading through in person and highlighting those one line bits of wisdom. I think philosophers give those so well. Is there any any statement or quote about tolerance that you uncovered while you were writing limits of tolerance or elsewhere in your studies that you wouldn't mind leaving us with

Denis Lacorne, PhD 22:47

well, there's Voltaire's saying on on whether you should have one two or more than two religion. Quote, if there were only one religion in England, and is visiting England at a time you did century, there would be danger. of despotism. If there were two religions, they would cut each other's throats. But there are 30 and they live in peace and happiness. And

Karly Shepherd 23:22

Professor Denis Lacorne is author of the limits of tolerance, enlightenment values and religious fanaticism. Professor Lacorne, where can people find more of your work?

Denis Lacorne, PhD 23:31

There are a couple of talks that I gave in English that are available on the web a short presentation of the book The limits of tolerance so there's that could be useful.

Gabe Hostin 23:54

Dr. Denis Lacorne is a senior research fellow at the Paris Institute of Political Studies. Karly Shepherd is a freshman at Baylor University. Our website is [untextbooked.org](http://untextbooked.org) and we're on social media at UnTextbooked. Our music is by Silas Bowen and Coleman Hamilton UnTextbooked is edited by Bethany Denton and Jeff Emtman. Fernanda raine is our executive producer. UnTextbooked is a project of Got history and organization that believes in a world where all young people can advance civic well being for themselves. Society and the planet. Thanks for listening