Terrorism and toleration do not sit easily together. Terrorism is an extreme form of intolerance of what it opposes and, for most people, terrorism is itself intolerable. Those who think otherwise usually call it something other than ‘terrorism’. So an analysis of the relationship between terrorism and toleration is likely to be very brief. However, there are very many issues of toleration that surround the subject of terrorism. For example, how far should we tolerate the curtailing of civil liberties by those who seek to combat terrorism, and how far should we tolerate the activities of those who, while not committing terrorist acts themselves, defend, advocate or ‘glorify’ the terrorism of others?

In this article, I shall cast my net still wider. The ‘War on Terror’ has become caught up with large issues characterised variously as conflicts between western and non-western values, ‘wars’ between cultures, and a ‘clash of civilizations’. How far it is right to view the contemporary world in terms of these grand conflicts, or to conceive the ‘War on Terror’ as symptomatic of them, is intensely disputed. However, there is no doubt that very many people, in all parts of the globe and wherever they stand on the ‘War on Terror’, perceive it in these larger terms so that the ‘War’ is conceived as both embedded in and stemming from deep cultural, social and political differences. My concern here is to investigate the idea of international toleration as it relates to those fundamental differences.

Toleration is about not preventing or impeding what we disapprove of or dislike. We have no occasion to tolerate what we find unexceptionable. The objectionable that we tolerate can include minor irritations and dislikes, but it can also include conduct to which we have serious moral objection. Normally, we might suppose that, if an act is wrong and if we can prevent it, we should. How can it be right or virtuous to fail to prevent a preventable wrong? Yet serious instances of toleration are instances in which we willingly allow wrong to be done. Moreover, although we can use ‘toleration’ and ‘tolerance’ as neutral terms, they have generally acquired a favourable ring in our language. Thus, when we tolerate, we frequently think we are right and perhaps deserving of praise for our toleration; tolerance is commonly regarded as a virtue and toleration as a mark of the good society.

Some commentators have suggested that the way toleration conjoins the right and the wrong presents us with a paradox. But to present toleration as paradoxical is to make it seem more mysterious and puzzling than it really is. In the paradigm case of toleration, we confront conflicting reasons. If x is a possible object of our toleration, we have both (a) reason to object to x and therefore reason to prevent it and (b) reason not to prevent x. We have reason to tolerate x, all things considered, if our reason not to prevent x overrides our reason to prevent it.\(^1\) Issues of toleration, therefore, confront us with conflicts of reason and the phenomenon of conflicting or competing reasons is ubiquitous and commonplace. Nevertheless, because toleration can entail permitting acts or events that are wrong or bad or misguided, it does prompt us to consider how it can be justified. What sort of reason can make it better to permit than to prevent the wrong or the bad?

Analyses of toleration and arguments about its justification have focused overwhelmingly on toleration as an issue within societies. Very little of the literature on toleration has turned from the domestic to the international case.\(^2\) We need not put
that down wholly to neglect or oversight. I shall suggest in a moment why an explicit concern with toleration may have seemed less pressing or appropriate in international than in domestic politics. But, in the contemporary world, there are myriad instances of issues that arise across or beyond national boundaries that are properly characterised as issues of toleration. Indeed, as humanity becomes more globally aware and interactive, we should expect issues of toleration to arise increasingly at the global level.

Toleration can be motivated by nothing other than a strategic calculation of self-interest. I may tolerate my boss’s ill-mannered behaviour simply because I want to retain her favour and enhance my prospects of promotion. Similarly a state may tolerate a regime’s violations of human rights only because it wishes to retain that regime as an ally in opposing a common foe. These are quite properly described as instances of ‘toleration’, but they are not the sorts of case in which we puzzle over the rightness of toleration, nor will they be my concern here. Rather, I want to focus upon cases in which toleration is more than merely self-interested. Most obviously these will be cases in which toleration can claim a moral justification, though the justification may also be non-moral – it may be grounded, for example, in uncertainty about the truth and a reluctance to act on assumptions or information that may turn out to be mistaken. However, in distinguishing the moral from the merely strategic, I do not mean to suggest that the moral and the prudential must always point in different directions. There is no reason, for example, why a condition of mutual toleration cannot be both just and to the advantage of all.

I have adopted the term ‘international’ toleration because I am primarily interested in toleration and intolerance between societies and particularly in the reasons ‘outsiders’ may have for tolerating cultures and social arrangements to which they take exception. What differentiates issues of toleration in the international case is that they relate to collective units that we might label variously as states or societies or peoples. If we adopt a global perspective on toleration in which our concern is all humanity without regard to national boundaries, it would seem that issues of toleration and the arguments relevant to them will be identical with those that might arise within a single society. Certainly, the beliefs, values and cultures that exist globally are more diverse than those that exist within any particular society, so that global issues of toleration may be more numerous, rooted in more deep-seated differences and possibly therefore less tractable than their counterparts within particular states. But it is not clear that the general considerations that militate either for or against toleration will be categorically different if the focus of our toleration is global rather than societal. However, these may well be different if we treat national boundaries as significant and take states or societies or peoples as possible subjects and objects of toleration. That is why I describe my concern with toleration and intolerance in this paper as ‘international’ rather than ‘global’.

The possibility of international toleration

I previously suggested that there might be reasons why toleration has received less attention as an international than as an intra-national issue. One such reason may be that lack of international toleration has not been the problem. Given the reluctance of governments to undertake risks and to incur costs other than for the benefit of their own nationals, the problem might be conceived as one of too much rather than too
little toleration. External governments remained onlookers during the genocide in Rwanda; most have remained onlookers, or little more, during the crisis in Darfur. While there have been more instances of humanitarian intervention since the end of the Cold War than formerly, we might think that governments have been unduly reluctant, rather overly ready, to intervene in other countries for humanitarian purposes. In other words, we may think that, internationally, governments should be induced to tolerate less rather than more.

A possible explanation of a directly opposite sort lies in the dominance of the realist tradition in international relations. According to that tradition, states either will not, or should not, be concerned with more than merely strategic toleration or intolerance. We should not expect states and their governments to do any more or other than pursue their own interests.

However, there is a further consideration that relates to the viability of the very idea of international toleration. A commonly accepted possibility condition of toleration is that the tolerator must have power over the tolerated. B can tolerate A only if B is able to affect A’s conduct. If B has no control over A’s conduct, he is in no position either to tolerate or not to tolerate her conduct. Without that ability, he may still be tolerantly or intolerantly disposed towards A, but neither toleration nor intolerance will be real options for B.

If we adopt a simple Westphalian view of the world, in which each state is sovereign over its own affairs, toleration may seem to disappear from the international agenda. If the government and people of each state honour the sovereignty of every other state, they will regard themselves as properly powerless to interfere in the affairs of other states. They will therefore suppose that they are in no position either to tolerate or not to tolerate what happens outside their own jurisdictions and the idea of international toleration will not get off the ground.

That simple Westphalian view does not describe the world in which we live (Krasner 1999). States, or their governments, interfere in one another’s affairs all the time and they are not the only international actors who do so. In so far, as international intervention is a matter of right or wrong rather than sheer impossibility, it is a possible subject of toleration. The intervention that is at issue in international toleration should not be limited to military intervention. It can also include measures such as economic sanctions, the setting of conditions for the receipt of aid, the passage of condemnatory resolutions in the UN, and use of propaganda and aggressive ‘educational’ programmes.

Inequalities of power across the international system mean that toleration and intolerance are options more available to some than to others. The US can tolerate or not tolerate what happens in Grenada, but Grenada is in no position either to tolerate or not to tolerate what happens in the US. But the events of 9/11 and their aftermath graphically illustrate that even the most powerful states are vulnerable to the consequences of external disapproval.

**Reasons for toleration**
Many different reasons have been mobilised in defence of toleration. They have varied according to the beliefs and values that people have brought to the argument and according to the specific matter at issue. In political contexts, four general types of reason have been prominent, although these by no means exhaust the field. One appeals to the adverse consequences of intolerance, such as the human suffering it may cause. Another appeals to scepticism, doubt or reasonable disagreement in challenging the basis of intolerance. A third appeals to an idea of the human good and suggests that human well-being may be enhanced by letting people pursue their own conception of their good, even though we might think it mistaken or ill-judged. A fourth points to the status and respect that we should accord people as persons, which provides reason to allow them to take their own path even when we think it the wrong path.

Of these four general sorts of reason, that which has most ready appeal in the international context is the first. Intervention by one state in the affairs of another can result in immense human suffering, terrible bloodshed and widespread loss of life. The bad should be tolerated if the consequences of intolerance will be even worse. Saddam Hussein’s regime, for example, may have been bad for most Iraqis and a threat to the region but, if the human costs and political consequences of toppling it prove even worse, better that his regime should have been tolerated. Sometimes this sort of consequentialist defence of toleration can seem merely prudential. It is if it is motivated merely by the tolerator’s self-interest, but not if the concern is to minimise human suffering and loss of life. Certainly, on this consequentialist approach, the case for toleration will be contingent upon the particularity of circumstances, but its contingency does not make it prudential rather than moral.

Any approach to political toleration or intolerance that pays no attention to consequences is not to be taken seriously. ‘Let justice be done, though heaven fall’ is not a good political motto, especially for the international world. However, while we must take consequences seriously, we need not place the case for toleration entirely at their mercy. Suppose that one state were so overwhelmingly powerful that it could enforce its wishes on another without either bloodshed or overt conflict. Would that put an end to the argument? We may think that intolerance can be wrong even if it does not have the dire consequences that we associate with international conflict. And even if it does have adverse consequences, we may think it wrong not only because of those consequences.

In the remainder of this paper I want to explore the relevance to the international world of another of the four sorts of argument for toleration that I identified above: that which appeals to the status of persons and the respect they are due.

**Toleration and respecting persons**

The idea of personhood is now frequently deployed in defence of toleration. To be recognised as a person is to be recognised as a being who is capable of reflection and judgement and of making decisions for oneself. It is also to be recognised as someone whose wishes and decisions about their own life should be respected. That respect turns not on the merit of an individual’s wishes and decisions but on the status of the individual whose wishes and decisions they are.
This idea of personhood is closely associated with Kant, for whom it was integrally related with that of autonomy. Human beings were uniquely capable of autonomous conduct. They were capable of possessing and being guided by a rational will and they acted autonomously in conforming with that will. It was that capacity that distinguished them as persons. That conception of having command over one’s own conduct has remained an important part of the idea of personhood but, in the hands of subsequent theorists, personhood has been loosened from the firm grip of Kant’s uncompromising notion of moral autonomy. To be a person is to be capable of reflecting on and taking a view on the character of one’s own life and on the life one wishes to live or believes one should live. But it does not entail the notion that one’s life either can be or should be entirely self-made -- that it should be chosen in a way that is independent of all external influence and indebted only to the self whose life it is. Rather than thinking of a person’s life as a life that person has chosen, we do better to think of it as a life a person has ‘embraced’. That is truer to the reality of people’s lives and how they come to live them. People can be committed to a form of life even though their coming to live that form of life is not uniquely a consequence of their self-originated choice.

This conception of persons and the respect they are due is central to the deontological liberalism of theorists such as John Rawls, Charles Larmore, Thomas Nagel, T. M. Scanlon, and Brian Barry. But it is not unique to that school of thought and is now very widely shared. However, as a reason for toleration, it needs to be carefully distinguished from the third type of reason that I listed above, a reason that turns on a conception of the human good. An individual’s well-being may be better served by allowing her to live an inferior form of life to which she is committed than by compelling her to live an intrinsically superior form of life to which she has no commitment. What does the work in this argument is not a conception of what we owe persons qua persons but a conception of how we can best promote well-being or whatever other standard we use to evaluate the quality of people’s lives. We can mark the difference between these two reasons for toleration by way of the distinction between status and merit. When we appeal to the idea of personhood, we appeal to an idea of status but, when we appeal to the quality of people’s lives, we appeal to an idea of merit.

Very often the practical demands of personhood and of well-being will be the same, but they need not be. If we operate purely with an idea of the good, we cannot have reason to allow someone to live an inferior form of life if, all things considered (including the impact of our intolerance), we could contrive that they should live better. But if we operate with the idea of respect for persons, we may have reason to allow someone to live a life that we evaluate as bad -- and bad for that particular person all things considered. One reason why the idea of respect for persons lends itself so readily to toleration is because it entails an idea of status. Thus, even when someone’s life lacks merit, the status of the person who lives it might oblige us to tolerate it. Status trumps (de)merit. That is not to say that status must always trump merit. At some point a form of life may become so bad that we think its badness is more significant than the status of the person who lives it, so that merit trumps status. All I mean to point to here is that the ideas of status and respect associated with personhood can provide a readily intelligible account of why we might think it right to tolerate ways of life, or features of ways of life, that we judge bad or inferior.
There is one sense in which the idea of personhood that I have described here is individualistic: it invests moral standing in individual persons. But there are other forms of individualism that it does not entail. In particular, it does not imply that the best form of life is individualistic. The idea that individuals are the ultimate possessors of moral status is entirely consistent with the notion that the best life (the most satisfying, the most fulfilling, the most complete life) for human beings is collective or communal in form. Nor does it imply that individuals must register their claims only as so many individuals. The ways of life embraced by persons may be collective in form so that respecting those persons will entail respecting the collective form of life to which they are committed.

**Rawls and the Society of Peoples**

Is it possible, then, to deploy this sort of reason as a reason for toleration in the international domain? One philosopher who has done so is John Rawls (1999). However, for Rawls, the parties who constitute the subjects and the objects of toleration internationally are not persons but ‘peoples’. Persons, in their role as citizens, are the actors in a liberal society; but we should view the international world as a ‘society of peoples’ and, in that society, peoples, not persons, are the relevant moral actors (23). In his *Law of Peoples*, Rawls sets out his vision of a just international order that encompasses both liberal and ‘decent hierarchical’ peoples. These two sorts of people differ fundamentally in the way they organise their societies. Nevertheless they have reason to tolerate one another as members in good standing of the society of peoples. In a liberal society, it would be unjust for some citizens to use political power to impose their comprehensive doctrine and its associated conception of the good upon others. Analogously, in the society of peoples it would be unjust for one people to impose its conception of the best or the right society on peoples who possess different conceptions (11-12, 59, 84). Thus, for Rawls, the form that toleration should take amongst peoples internationally mimics the toleration that the citizens of a liberal society should accord one another. Moreover, just as the case for toleration in a liberal society is rooted in a conception of citizens as free and equal persons, so international toleration should be rooted in a conception of peoples as free and equal (33-4, 37, 60, 69-70). Peoples should recognise and respect one another as equal members in good standing of the society of peoples. Indeed, Rawls sometimes presents that recognition and respect as what international toleration consists in, rather than as a reason for toleration.4

Peoples are clearly made up of individuals but for Rawls the moral standing of peoples seems to owe nothing to their being composed of persons. On the contrary, at the international level, a people stands in a strictly analogous relation to a person at the domestic level. Rather than derive its moral significance from the moral standing of its members severally, a people, for Rawls, has the same irreducibility as a moral entity as a person. We might describe peoples, on Rawls’s view, as ‘corporate persons’, although, to avoid confusion I shall continue to use ‘persons’ to describe only human individuals. Peoples possess equal moral standing simply as peoples and they have rights and bear duties just as peoples.

What then, for Rawls, distinguishes a people as a people? A people, he says, possesses three basic features: a common government, common sympathies, and a moral nature. In ascribing a moral nature to a people, he supposes that it possesses ‘a
firm attachment to a political (moral) conception of right and justice’ (24). Peoples, he supposes, are capable of and committed to just relations with other peoples. Accordingly, they will offer fair terms of cooperation with other peoples and will honour those terms, provided they are assured that other peoples will do the same (25).

Rawls is insistent that by peoples he does not mean states (23-30). He distinguishes peoples from states because he wishes to emphasise the moral nature of peoples and not to ascribe to them the unconstrained sovereignty that has been traditionally ascribed to states. Is a people, then, something that has a pre-political or non-political identity; is it something that might exist in the absence of a state or a common government? Some of Rawls’s remarks suggest that it might. As I have previously mentioned, he says that a people is distinguished by ‘common sympathies’ by which he means the sense of nationality that Mill described and attributed to factors such as common race and descent, a common language, community of religion and a shared history (23). He also describes peoples as possessing different cultures and traditions of thought (11, 40) and observes that they may exhibit a ‘proper patriotism’ and take pride in their histories and achievements (62, 111-12). Yet nothing he says really suggests that he means to identify peoples with anything other than the populations of states as they currently exist. In relation to the way in which humanity is currently divided for political purposes, Rawls apparently intends the concept of a ‘people’ to be as uncontroversial and as unchallenging an idea as it has been in the hands of the United Nations.

If a people is identical with the population of a state, it is hard to be won over to the idea that it has a strong corporate identity independently of the state, given the highly contingent origins of most state boundaries. It is also hard to accept that its non-state identity is such that we should conceive it as a single unitary entity possessing irreducible moral standing. Rawls conceives a people as a moral, rather than a merely legal, entity and the claims that peoples can reasonably make upon one as moral claims. His ‘law of peoples’ is not a ‘law’ in the ordinary sense. It is a set of moral principles that should govern the conduct of peoples. It aims to provide a moral foundation for international law rather than a draft of international law itself; hence his identification of the law of peoples with a ‘realistic utopia’. Rawls cannot therefore rely upon law to provide the corporate identity he ascribes to a people.

More generally, the idea that we can plausibly ascribe irreducible moral standing to groups as groups is widely doubted. The idea of corporate persons has a well-established place in law. The idea that non-legal corporate persons should occupy a similar place in our moral thinking, though sometimes canvassed, is much less readily accepted. Often the impetus behind that idea seems to be the belief that, if we do not conceive groups as moral analogues of persons, we cannot do justice to the role they play in the lives of human beings. That belief, I shall now argue, is misplaced.7

Groups: corporate and collective

In place of Rawls’s corporate conception of peoples, we can adopt what I shall describe as a ‘collective’ conception. When we conceive a group claim as a collective claim, we conceive it as the joint claim of the several individuals who make up the group. If we conceive a group claim in that way, we need not ascribe to the group a
moral identity or standing that is somehow separate from, and independent of, that of the individuals who make it up. On the contrary, the moral standing that underwrites the claim is that of the several individuals who constitute the group. We can therefore acknowledge group claims without having to pretend that, morally, a group constitutes a 'super-person'.

Can this way of conceiving group claims cope with claims that have an intrinsically group nature? We might suspect that, while a collective conception can make sense of claims that are contingently the claims of a group, it cannot adequately characterise claims that only a group can make. By a contingent group claim I mean one that is registered by a group but that might also be registered by individuals severally. For example, a church may claim the freedom to practise its own forms of worship, but those forms of worship may be such that an individual adherent of the faith could intelligibly claim the same freedom as an individual. But not all group claims are like that. Sometimes they are claims to goods that can be claimed plausibly or reasonably only by a group. Consider a claim that public measures should be instituted to protect and sustain the language of a linguistic minority. Given that the language is a good that is public to the minority and given the costs involved in instituting measures to protect and sustain it, this is not a claim that a single member of the minority could reasonably make as an independent individual. Or consider the same sort of claim in respect of a culture. A culture is, by its very nature, a group phenomenon and it would seem that claims that the culture should be respected or promoted could be plausibly made only by or on behalf of the group. But, even in cases in which a good is such that it can be claimed and enjoyed only by a group, it makes perfect sense to conceive the good as one to which the members of the group have a shared or joint claim. The fact that a claim is one that the members of a group can plausibly register only as a group is quite consistent with ascribing the moral standing that underwrites their claim to the members of the group severally rather than to the group as a corporate entity.

If we conceive group claims in this collective fashion, we can appeal to the idea of persons, and to the respect they are owed, in defending group claims. In particular, just as respect for persons can be mobilised in defence of individual self-determination, so it can be mobilised in defence of collective self-determination. A claim to collective self-determination is clearly one that can be made only for a group but also one that can be conceived as a joint or shared claim of those who make up the group.

The sort of shift that Rawls makes from persons to peoples in moving from the domestic to the international case would therefore seem unnecessary. I do not mean to dismiss the idea of peoples in any form. I mean only that we are neither obliged nor best advised to treat peoples rather than persons as the moral entities whose ultimate and irreducible status grounds the case for international toleration.

For my purposes, a ‘people’ is a section of humanity that forms a self-determining unit. A people may be an entirely contingent entity; that is, there may be a large measure of contingency in the way humanity has come to be divided up into separate societies. For my purposes, that does not matter. What matters is that a set of individuals is constituted as a collective unit that has to order its own internal affairs. Hence a ‘people’ in my vocabulary is primarily a political entity and it need be no
more than that. I do not mean to deny that a people may sometimes be marked off from the rest of humanity by common characteristics such as a shared history, a common language and a common culture. Those common characteristics have some bearing on my argument but, for my purposes, the only feature of a people that is crucial to its being a people is its constituting a self-governing unit. I take peoples therefore to be conterminous with states. However, I do not take states to be the fundamental objects of international toleration. If we (whoever ‘we’ are here) owe duties of toleration to another society, the parties to whom we owe those duties are ultimately neither states nor peoples conceived as corporate entities but the persons who make up their populations.

I do not suppose, of course, that a people will be entirely self-determining. In the contemporary world, no population’s ‘internal’ affairs are free from external forces and influences and none is wholly self-determining. That is especially true of the economic life of societies. A society may have a greater measure of control over those of its features that are most likely to be objects of toleration or intolerance: its political structure, social organisation and way(s) of life. But I do not wish to assert any strong empirical claim to that effect. All I shall suppose is that, even after we have taken full account of the impact of globalisation, supra-national institutions and other external factors, a society retains sufficient control over its own character for it to be a possible and significant object of toleration.

Tolerating cultural difference

Perhaps the sort of difference that is associated more than any other with the idea of international or global toleration is cultural difference. Different societies possess different cultures or ways of life and practices that figure in one culture are sometimes condemned by another. Here I want to give substance to the general claims I have made by examining what it is that drives the thought that cultural differences between societies should be objects of toleration. In posing the issue in that way, I do not mean to suggest that, if we accept that cultures are proper objects of toleration, our toleration has to be indiscriminate. Rather my question is, if and in so far as we think that cultural differences are appropriate objects of toleration, why do we think that?

‘Culture’ is a problematic notion and we sometimes do better to unpack its content into other terms. It is often allowed too easily to sanctify what it describes; the rhetorical effect of describing beliefs, values and practices as ‘cultural’ can be to throw a protective halo around them so that they acquire a special status and immunity merely because they are (said to be) ‘cultural’. There are also well-recognised dangers of essentialising cultures and difficulties in deciding how we should individuate them. In particular, cultures do not map readily onto societies politically defined. However, I shall pursue none of those issues here. In order to get at the issue that is my concern, I shall continue to use the ideas of culture and cultural difference and to suppose that the culture that is a possible object of toleration belongs to a whole society so that the issue is one of international toleration.

Why, then, should we be tolerant in this sort of case? An answer that immediately suggests itself is: because we associate cultural diversity with relativism. ‘Relativism’ is another problematic and protean term. Sometimes, when it is applied to cultures, it is used to describe no more than the fact of cultural diversity, but that merely
empirical observation does not help us to decide how we should respond to the fact that it describes. Alternatively ‘cultural relativism’ might describe a moral doctrine: the doctrine that the right way for people to conduct their lives is in accordance with their particular culture. That is an odd doctrine. Why should we hold that view of right conduct quite irrespective of the content of any particular culture? Can a moral doctrine be quite so careless of what it endorses? If it can, it must do so in virtue of an ethical principle that undergirds its endorsement of cultural variety and it will be that principle the commands respect for cultural differences rather than the relativism it generates.

More frequently, cultural relativism expresses a form of scepticism. It expresses the belief that there is no set of norms that is properly universal in reach and that constitutes the truly correct morality for all human beings. There are merely different sets of norms that have been evolved by different segments of humanity. People may suppose that the particular morality to which they subscribe is uniquely right, but they are mistaken. They are also mistaken if they suppose that we might somehow turn up a genuinely correct set of norms that is independent of any particular culture and against which we can test the moral merit of the several cultures human beings have evolved.

In this form, cultural relativism expresses a meta-ethical rather than an ethical position, but it is a meta-ethical position that has practical implications. It implies that, if we set about imposing norms upon a community that are at variance with its own, in the belief that those norms are uniquely right or superior to the community’s own norms, we act on a false assumption. We suppose our beliefs and values to be something other than, and more than, the particular beliefs and values that they really are. This sort of scepticism can be, and has been, a potent force for toleration. It undermines intolerance that is based upon a belief in the superiority of one culture over another, or that supposes that we can access a uniquely valid set of norms that is categorically different from, and that stands free of, the merely local norms evolved by particular communities. Of course, if we are concerned at all with human well-being and with right relations between people, we also have reason to resist this sort of moral scepticism as comprehensive position since it can corrode any sort of moral conviction and issue in a comprehensive amorality. It deprives us, for example, of the resources to say that a culture that incorporates slavery is, in that respect, worse than one that does not; and, while it may be mobilised against inter-cultural intolerance, it can also be mobilised in defence of cultures that are internally repressive and externally aggressive. Nevertheless, we do not have to embrace moral scepticism comprehensively to recognise that intolerance has frequently resulted from people’s mistaking the local for the universal and the conventional for the absolute. The obvious way to combat intolerance of that sort is to challenge the convictions upon which it is based.

I do not wish to deny, therefore, that cultural relativism in this form can corrode intolerance. As with cultural relativism as a moral doctrine, it does not provide us with a reason for toleration strictly speaking, since it undermines intolerance by undermining the disapproval upon which it is based. Hence, in so far as it succeeds, it renders toleration unnecessary. But that may seem little more than pedantry, especially if we think that it is the absence of intolerance rather than the presence of toleration that really matters. However, even setting pedantry aside, this sceptical
form of relativism does not provide us with a wholly adequate case for toleration of cultural difference. It characterises intolerance as misguided rather than wrongful. It suggests that it is falsely based if it is grounded in a belief that another culture is wrong or morally inferior. But making a mistake is not the same as committing a wrong; we need more than an allegation of error if our toleration is to be the subject of a moral imperative. Moreover, unacceptable intolerance does not have to be the offspring of a false or questionable belief. It may be driven, for example, by a desire to dominate and by an appetite for the fruits of domination.

Where else, then, might we look for a justification of cultural toleration? Cultural diversity is frequently represented as itself a good. The fundamental thought here is that the world is richer for possessing a diversity of cultures and that it would be very much poorer if that diversity disappeared or were diminished through, for example, the erosive and homogenising effects of globalisation. The tedium and blandness of a monocultural world would compare most unfavourably with the rich cultural heterogeneity that has characterised humanity hitherto. Should we then ground the case for cultural toleration in the good of cultural diversity?

There are two reasons why that does not seem the right sort of foundation for cultural toleration. One is that, if cultural diversity presents us with a good, it ceases to be an object for toleration. In making this elementary point, I do not mean to suggest that we do better to find something objectionable so that we do not lose an opportunity for toleration. That would be absurd. Rather I mean that cultural differences do sometimes provide real occasions for toleration (or intolerance) and that to suppose that we can all find every feature of one another’s cultures ‘good’ is not to take seriously the deep disagreements and conflicts that exist amongst cultures. It is one thing to celebrate differences of cuisine, dress, literature and music. It is quite another to celebrate differences of belief concerning the relative status people should be accorded, the way they should treat one another, and the way they should treat non-human animals and the rest of the non-human world. Deep cultural differences are often founded in different religious faiths and those faiths make competing claims about truth, good and evil. It is nonsensical to ask the adherent of one faith to celebrate the existence of a rival faith or of atheistic disbelief, which the adherent must regard as false and pernicious. Cultural differences present all of us with serious questions concerning toleration and intolerance and indiscriminately to label all diversity ‘good’ is not to take cultures or their adherents seriously.

There is a second reason why the ‘good’ of cultural diversity does not seem the most compelling reason for cultural toleration. That conception of cultural diversity presents it as a public good; that is, as a good public to humanity as a whole. Thus, if a culture is suppressed or disadvantaged, we are all the losers. But, when a culture is suppressed or disadvantaged, we do not think that we are all equally the losers. Rather, we conceive it as a wrong inflicted upon a particular section of humanity – upon those whose culture it is. The particularity of that wrong cannot be explained by the general good of cultural diversity. By the same token, if we believe we should tolerate a controversial feature of a culture, our toleration is more plausibly owed to the bearers of that culture rather than to humanity at large.10

So what this points to is that the case for toleration of cultural difference is most plausibly grounded in a concern and respect for those whose culture is at stake. It is
not cultures themselves or their alleged relativism that drives the case for toleration. It is recognition of and respect for the status of those who bear them. Cultures do not, of themselves, possess moral standing, any more than do works of art or musical compositions or languages. Cultures matter because they matter to people, and they matter most to those whose cultures they are. We are driven back therefore to the idea of respect for persons and the claims that those persons have in respect of the culture they embrace. As I have previously argued, the collective character of a culture provides no reason why we should turn away from persons and towards peoples corporately conceived as the objects of our concern.

The idea of respect associated with personhood is not the only possible reason for grounding a concern for culture in a concern for its bearers. We might also appeal to the well-being of the people involved. We might hold that a life lived according to a culture that is in some way ‘theirs’ is always best for people. However, that claim will not work as a reason for toleration amongst people who have deeply conflicting beliefs and values and therefore deeply conflicting conceptions of what constitutes a good life and ‘well-being’. More compelling are the well-documented deleterious effects upon people of efforts to eradicate their inherited way of life and to replace it with something ‘better’. Thus, even when we find fault with a culture, the real alternatives may give us reason to leave it in place. I have no wish to brush aside these sorts of consideration. But, arguably, toleration is more securely based in the status of those whose way of life is at stake and our obligation to defer to their own beliefs and wishes, than in judgements of the merit of their culture and the feasibility of the alternatives.

**Democracy and popular sovereignty**

Does the approach I am suggesting here imply that only democratic political systems are tolerable? After all, the idea that we should conceive adult human beings as persons, who are to be accorded equal respect, readily translates into a case for political equality, which, in turn, translates into a case for political democracy. However, the idea of democracy is not the same as that of popular sovereignty, even though those two ideas are often elided. To be committed to democracy is to be committed to the rightness or goodness of a particular form of government. To be committed to popular sovereignty is to be committed to the legitimacy of whatever form of government a society’s population endorses for itself. Thus, in principle and sometimes in practice, an undemocratic form of government may pass the test of popular sovereignty. Where it does, we have reason (though not necessarily exclusive reason) to find that form of government tolerable. Of course, in the case of an undemocratic form of government, we may face empirical difficulties in knowing quite how much popular support it actually enjoys. The issue is also unlikely to be quite so simple as whether a regime does, or does not, enjoy popular support. It is more likely to involve complex assessments of the proportions of the population who either support or oppose the regime and of the relative intensities of their support or opposition. But let’s pass over those issues for the moment. If people genuinely endorse an undemocratic regime, arguably we owe it to them to respect their wishes about how their collective lives should be organised and managed. In other words, in these circumstances, respecting persons does not translate into a case for democracy; it translates into a case for whatever sort of regime those persons embrace.
Those who are scandalised by this conclusion might bear in mind three things. First, what I have said does not provide a case for undemocratic regimes merely because and in so far as they currently exist. It provides a case only insofar as those regimes genuinely enjoy popular support. Secondly, my argument here concerns toleration. Thus, it is quite consistent with the belief that democracy is always the best form of government and that a population mistakes its own interest if it opts for anything else. Thirdly, remember how ‘thin’ is the democracy that is urged upon those societies that do not already possess it. It is not some variant of the direct democracy of the Ancient World; the model is usually that of the US or a West European regime in which institutionalised popular participation is extremely limited and political equality more symbolic than real. Nor can that attenuated form of democracy be excused as the most democratic that we can enjoy under modern circumstances. If Switzerland can build referendums and the initiative into its political structures, so might other self-styled ‘democracies’ - but most choose not to. Once we take account of those realities, the contrast between soi-disant ‘democracies’ and an undemocratic but popularly supported regime appears less stark.

**Moral equality and social inequality**

The issue of how respect for persons relates to political systems is really part of a larger issue of how morally equal status relates to social and political institutions that accord people unequal status. Normally, morally equal status argues for a similar equality of status in a society’s social and political arrangements. There are, of course, all sorts of functional reasons why a society should want to create institutional structures that involve status hierarchies, such as the structures of authority normally exhibited by governments, judiciaries and militaries. The existence of a variety of offices that are occupied by some and not others, and that give some decision-making powers not possessed by others, is still consistent with a basic institutional commitment to the equal moral standing of people.

But suppose a society’s arrangements do accord fundamentally, rather than instrumentally, unequally statuses to the society’s members and that all concerned accept those arrangements. How should we view that state of affairs? Does it matter that those who are treated as inferiors in an arrangement themselves endorse that arrangement? It seems to me that it does. If respect for persons entails respecting people’s beliefs and wishes about how they should live, and if people are committed to a system of belief in which they occupy a lesser status than others, it would seem that we should give weight to their commitment even though we think it misplaced. There is more than a hint of paradox here, since our reason for respecting someone’s commitment to their unequal status is the equal status we attribute to them. But the appearance of paradox is mitigated if the commitment we are respecting is part of a broader commitment to a system of belief, such as a religious faith, rather than mere self-deprecation. Recall, too, that the issue here is not the rightness of people’s beliefs and practices but whether we have reason to tolerate them.

Men and women occupy positions of unequal standing in the Roman Catholic Church in that men are eligible for clerical office and women are not. Yet we would not ordinarily suppose that that warrants external intervention in the affairs of the Catholic Church compelling it to assign equal and identical roles to men and women. Nor do we suppose that it provides reason to find women’s commitment to Roman
Catholicism less tolerable than men’s. The Catholic Church is, of course, nowadays a voluntary association; people have real options of entry and exit, and those options are unlikely to be similarly real for people as members of a political community. I cite the case of the Catholic Church only to indicate that people’s acceptance of unequal roles can make a difference to how we respond to that inequality.

Of course, we need to be careful here. The case I describe is one in which people accept an inferiority of status for themselves, not one in which that inferiority is imposed upon them against their wishes. In addition, the perception that a society assigns different and unequal roles to its members may meet the riposte that those roles are not in fact unequal; they are merely different. That riposte is frequently given to ‘outsiders’ who complain about gender inequality in some non-western societies. This is also territory in which concerns about ‘adaptive preferences’ are likely to arise. That is far too large an issue for me to tackle here. I shall content myself with observing that just whose preferences are adaptive and whose are not is far from straightforward; we must guard against the propensity to suppose that ‘their’ preferences are adaptive but ‘ours’ are not. Secondly, preferences or beliefs need be no less firmly and sincerely held for being adaptive and it is the fact of the preferences and beliefs that people actually embrace with which we have to deal.

Social dissensus and the limits of international toleration

Throughout this article, I have emphasised respect for persons as a reason for tolerating collective forms of life of which we disapprove but to which those who live them are committed. But we have also to confront the question of how far that respect has an opposite import. If respect for persons argues for toleration of collective forms of life, it also argues for limits on the extent to which collectivities can be intolerant of individuals or minorities who wish to live other forms of life. Internationally, this takes us into the familiar territory of human rights, conceived as safeguards that limit what governments, groups and other power-holders may do to (or may not do for) those who are subject to their power. I shall not address the issue of human rights here but, clearly, the sort of ethic to which I have appealed argues strongly for those rights.

A further complication is dissensus within societies over their basic structures. For the sake of simplicity, I have assumed that, while societies exhibit different basic structures, each population broadly endorses the basic structure of its own society, so that, for each society, conflicts concerning the ordinary run of social and political issues are contained within a larger context of consensus. Clearly that assumption will often be false. I have argued that respect for persons provides a case for tolerating undemocratic and unequal arrangements but only provided those arrangements are genuinely endorsed by those who live under them. Thus, where conflict over a society’s basic structure takes the form of an unrepresentative elite coercively imposing its favoured arrangements upon a dissenting population, equal respect for persons provides no case for toleration – though others considerations, particularly calculations of cost and consequence, may still do so. But where a population is genuinely divided amongst itself, respect for persons may give us no steer on which side we should favour.
My principal concern has been to show the potency of the idea of respect for persons as a reason for international toleration of different cultural, social and political arrangements. In particular, when we move from the domestic to the international level, we have no need to forsake ‘persons’ for ‘peoples’ as the ultimate objects of our concern. I have also tried to show how an idea that is often used to argue for egalitarian social and political arrangements can, under the right circumstances, argue for toleration of arrangements of a quite different sort. The simple idea of respect for persons will not always yield simple answers and it constitutes only one of many considerations that bear upon the complicated and messy world of international politics, but it does have something to contribute to our thinking on the larger issues that surround the ‘War on Terror’.
Endnotes


2. Three conspicuous exceptions are Walzer (1997), Rawls (1999) and Tan (2000). Because of the latitude societies are willing to give one another through the idea of sovereignty, Walzer describes international society as ‘the most tolerant of all societies’ (1997, 19).

3. Attempts rationally to persuade are usually deemed consistent with toleration, presumably because they do not prevent or hinder the conduct that the persuader argues against. But when such attempts move beyond giving reasons and leaving people to make up their own minds, they can be reasonably viewed as entering the realm of intolerance (which is not, of course, to say that they are necessarily wrong in any particular instance or to imply that all forms of intolerance are equally intolerant). We might even say that B, who objects to A’s conduct but is content to leave it unchanged, is more tolerant than C who objects to A’s conduct and tries to alter it through persuasion. Members of non-evangelical religions such as Judaism and Hinduism sometimes object in these terms to the proselytising activities of Christians and Muslims. See further Jones 2008.

4. E.g. ‘To tolerate also means to recognize these nonliberal societies as equal participating members in good standing of the society of Peoples, with certain rights and obligations, including the duty of civility requiring that they offer other peoples public reasons appropriate to the Society of Peoples for their actions.’ (1999, 59, my emphasis; see also 63, 84).

5. Reidy (2004, 294) describes peoples, on Rawls’s view, as ‘corporate moral agents’ and ‘as persons in the moral sense of that term’.

6. In fact Rawls presents these as three features of a liberal people and, rather than just observing that a liberal people has a ‘common government’, he says that they possess ‘a reasonably just constitutional democratic government that serves their fundamental interests’ (1999, 23). However, I infer that Rawls regards a common government, common sympathies and a moral nature as features common to both liberal and decent hierarchical peoples.

7. For a general critique of this analogical approach, though one that focuses on the analogy between persons and states rather than peoples, see Beitz 1999, Part II.

8. I examine the contrast between corporate and collective conceptions of groups in Jones 1999. However, there I limit my analysis to group rights, whereas here I want to extend the implications of the collective conception beyond rights.

9. Walzer’s thinking often seems in sympathy with this position. He presents himself as a defender of the standing of ‘states’ (1980), but, unlike Rawls, his conception of political communities as moral claimants seems to be collective rather than corporate in nature. He attributes to states rights to territorial integrity and political sovereignty, but adds that these rights ‘derive ultimately from the rights of individuals, and from them they take their force’ and insists that we should not conceive states as ‘organic wholes’ or ‘mystical unions’ (1992, 53). He also observes, ‘The real subject of my argument is not the state at all but the political community that (usually) underlies it. ... the idea of communal integrity derives its moral and political force from the rights of contemporary men and women to live as members of a historic community and to express their inherited culture through political forms worked out among themselves (the forms are never entirely worked out in a single generation)’ (1980, 210-11).
10. It might be argued that we have to put up with particular bads if we are to retain the overall good of cultural diversity. That suggestion does have the structure of an argument for toleration. We have reason to tolerate some bad features of cultures because that it is a price we have to pay if we are to retain the overall good of cultural heterogeneity. In this argument, the badness of bad practices is not cancelled by the greater good of cultural diversity, so that it is genuinely one that calls for toleration. However, this case for toleration is highly contingent upon what is, in fact, necessary to retain the good of cultural diversity. It is frequently quite implausible to suggest that intolerance of particular practices will result in the collapse or unravelling of the larger cultures in which those practices are embedded. For example, the suppression of *sati* (or *suttee*) has not destroyed the larger Hindu culture within which it existed, and it is hard to believe that prohibition of female circumcision would trigger a domino-style collapse of the cultures in which it is currently practised.

**References**


