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The meanings of tolerance: Discursive usage in a case of 'identity politics'

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Abstract

The notion of tolerance is widely embraced across
many settings and is generally considered critical for
the peaceful functioning of plural societies, and with-
in organizations, institutions, and many professions.
However, the concept of tolerance has various mean-
ings and can be discursively used in different ways and
for different purposes. The various understandings and
their usage can have different implications for norma-
tive views and real-world decision making. This paper
focuses on two main understandings of tolerance and
how these are flexibly used in a debate about the case in
which a social work student was excluded from further
study by an university committee. This case serves as a
particular illumination of the broader societal context
of 'cultural wars' and 'identity politics' in which the no-
tion of tolerance features prominently. It is examined
how those who did and did not support the university
decision deployed in different ways the notion of toler-
ance. It is concluded that tolerance has different cultural
meanings which can be used for various ends in debates
about contentious issues and for justifying or criticizing
impactful decisions.

Recent years have witnessed an increase in the use of terms such as diversity, inclusion and tolerance as normative signposts in western societies. These terms have become common in organizations, institutions, educational contexts, work environments, and in public, political and academic debates (Verkuyten et al., 2019). Individuals as well as institutions are increasingly concerned about the recognition of group identities and possible offense and psychological harm, especially of marginalized and vulnerable groups and communities. The recognition and respect for minority group identities is considered central for minority members' well-being and feelings of self-worth. Tolerance, equality and inclusion are put forward as key values to be promoted by policy makers as well as professionals such as educators, therapists and social workers. Tolerance as the recognition and appreciation of differences is presented as an antidote towards being judgmental, disapproving and negative toward others. Yet, according to critics this type of 'identity politics' leads to the silencing of alternative views and the closing down of debate about contentious moral issues. The emphasis on recognition and appreciation would go against the development of critical thinking skills that are essential for open debate, and in educational and professional practices (Blackford, 2019; Furedi, 2011; Weissberg, 2008).

Tolerance and intolerance are complex phenomena that can be understood in different ways and be used for different rhetorical and societal ends (Brown, 2006; Verkuyten & Kollar, 2021; Wolff et al., 1969). For example, sometimes the word tolerance is used in its classical sense for referring to endurance and putting up with things one disagrees with, dislikes or disapproves of, and sometimes in its modern sense as the general willingness to accept and appreciate a myriad of differences (Verkuyten et al., 2020; Von Bergen et al., 2012; Weissberg, 2008). Further, those arguing against intolerance and for recognition and respect of minority identities, have been accused of being themselves intolerant of competing beliefs and worldviews (Blackford, 2019; Carson, 2012). The self-proclaimed tolerant would be intolerant by defining particular beliefs as being unacceptable and therefore beyond discussion ('you can't say that'), and by arguing for speech codes and authority interference for shutting down views that they consider offensive (Campbell & Manning, 2018; Fenton & Smith, 2019).

There have been various cases in academics, the arts, sports, and in corporations and organizations in which individuals expressing heterodox views have become the subject of controversy, investigation, smearing and public shaming on social media. People have had to step down and have lost their jobs and careers for expressing their beliefs (e.g. Buonanno at AT&T), and novelist (e.g. Germaine Greer, Lionel Shriver), sports celebrities (e.g. Martina Navratilova) and public figures (e.g. Maajid Nawaz) have faced forms of outrage and call-out culture (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014; Blackford, 2019). Further, the moral and religious beliefs of professionals such as teachers, lawyers, doctors, nurses, therapists, and social workers can have an impact on them being able to obtain and maintain employment and to publicly share their views. For example, various countries have seen strong debates over LGBT+ rights and the freedom of conscience of devout Christians, and freedom of speech of university students and faculty for expressing conservative beliefs.

Each of these, and other cases, have their own characteristics and dynamics but there are also similarities and here I discuss the high profile case of Felix Ngole which attracted much media attention (Ngole, 2018). Specifically, I focus on the online debate that followed after him

being excluded in 2016 from a social work course at Sheffield University in Great Britain. Ngole is a devout Christian who was excluded after posting his opposition to same-sex marriage on Facebook. The debate that followed provides a particular illumination of the ways in which the notions of tolerance and intolerance are flexibly used in arguing about the nature of beliefs and their professional impact, in this case, on social work practice. The field of social work is especially interesting and relevant because tolerance and promoting equality, diversity and inclusion are considered to underpin and define the profession (Fenton & Smith, 2019). Furthermore, the development of autonomous and reflective thinking is a central goal of social work training as stipulated by the former British Health and Care Professions Council and now regulated by Social Work England. Students need to learn to question and criticize their own perspectives and views and those of others, for developing the capacity to deal with complexities and uncertainties and demonstrating an informed and responsible engagement (Fenton & Smith, 2019). Paradoxically, however, the emphasis on tolerance and appreciation might inhibit critical thinking by censoring heterodox views and justifying exclusion from the profession. The aim of learning to handle uncertainties and critically evaluate moral arguments and assumptions (classical tolerance) might be more difficult to achieve with an emphasis on unconditional appreciation and acceptance (modern tolerance). Faced with moral dilemmas, social work students have been found to apply codified and standard procedural responses rather than to think deeply and critically (Fazzi, 2016; Whittaker & Reimer, 2017). Not causing offence and a desire to protect people from offence often seems to be more important than engaging with contentious issues raised by heterodox viewpoints.

1 | BELIEF AND TOLERANCE

The conception of 'belief' can be considered to apply to things 'that' we believe and to things 'in which' we believe (Treanor & Sweetman, 2021). The former epistemic meaning relates to matters that one holds to be true. To believe something is taking it to be so and this conception of 'belief' does not only apply to the physical ('I believe it rains') and social ('I believe he is lazy') world, but also to the religious domain ('I believe God exists').

To belief *in* something implies that one binds oneself to a particular principle or doctrine which determines how one understands oneself and others. Ideological, religious and moral beliefs are connected to action by meaningfully governing one's life and sense of self. Acting on one's conscience and exercising moral autonomy implies following one's own beliefs and convictions. Freedom of conscience is, for example, discussed in relation to contested medical services (e.g. abortion) and health care provision (Harris, 2012; Murphy & Genius, 2013).

A person's ideological and moral beliefs and convictions will often differ from those of other individuals, especially in plural societies. The moral beliefs and values of one person can differ from, or even contradict, those of another person and these differences cannot be resolved easily (Ellemers, 2017; Wagner, 2021). Because of their propositional content, beliefs and convictions are not like personal preferences or social conventions that can have equal value (Crane, 2017; Turiel, 2002). The moral beliefs that people hold are often 'sacred' (Graham & Haidt, 2012), and subjectively considered categorical and objectively correct (Skitka et al., 2021). To the extent that individuals consider their own moral position as self-evidently right and objectively grounded, they will view other positions as wrong, misguided and even immoral (Wright et al., 2014). If others more strongly emphasize their own particular beliefs or even have distinct moral commitments, this will lead to genuine moral disagreements about how societies, professions, and

everyday life should be organized. It is very unlikely that people who hold a strong conviction will come to appreciate and approve of beliefs of others who strongly subscribe to an alternate worldview. For example, if someone sincerely believes that abortion is murder due to their religious belief, or if someone is deeply committed to abortion rights from a commitment toward women's freedoms, it is unrealistic to try and convince them to be open-minded and accept the 'other side's perspective'. In one case, this would mean asking people to permit what they consider murder, and in the other case it would mean asking someone to relinquish concerns for women's fundamental rights.

However, what can be expected in such situations is the approach of classical tolerance, where we do not surrender our own convictions and beliefs, but rather show forbearance by putting up with something that we sincerely disapprove of or are negative about (Cohen, 2004; King, 2012). Tolerance implies judgment and disapproval, together with self-restraint and not interfering with the disapproved-of beliefs and conduct of others. In this classic understanding, tolerance involves acceptance despite disapproval whereby the latter is a critical ingredient: 'one cannot tolerate ideas of which one approves' (Gibson, 2006, p. 22). Judgment and disapproval of dissenting beliefs is a necessary aspect of classical tolerance that provides others the freedom and equal right to follow and act on their own conscience and exercise their moral autonomy: 'Tolerance affirms the freedom of conscience and individual autonomy' (Furedi, 2011, p. 5). Tolerating the existence and expression of beliefs one disapproves of ('respecting the right to hold particular beliefs') is not necessarily the same as considering these beliefs as being equally valid ('respecting the belief as such'). Rather, tolerance makes it possible that people can live their life in accordance with their own beliefs that others disapprove of. It makes it possible that people can develop and exercise their moral autonomy because others do not negatively interfere with their beliefs, censor their views, or ban their contributions.

However, tolerance and intolerance are complex phenomena that can be understood and evaluated in different ways (Forst, 2013; Ricoeur, 1996; Walzer, 1997; Wolff et al., 1969). The modern understanding of tolerance rejects the classical forbearance conceptualization as being too negative ('mere' tolerance) or inadequate for plural societies. Tolerance has been reinterpreted as a non-judgmental recognition and affirmation of others' beliefs and the related practices (e.g. Galeotti, 2015; see also Von Bergen et al., 2012; Weissberg, 2008). In this understanding, tolerance is equated with appreciation, approval, and liking of the different ways of life, and especially those of minority groups. Claiming that a person is tolerant would not mean that they endure the things that they disapprove of (classical understanding), but rather that they disapprove of little. Tolerance is considered a value orientation and a generally positive response towards a myriad of differences and, thus, the opposite of prejudice, bigotry, xenophobia, homophobia and the like (e.g. Hjerm et al., 2019). This positive orientation would be fostered by a non-judgmental and open-minded thinking style, in contrast to the judgmental nature and related self-restraint of classical tolerance (Sandel, 1989). Yet, this modern understanding might limit free speech by prescribing and enforcing what one has to believe.

In both the classical and modern understanding, the term 'tolerance' is frequently celebrated while acclaims for intolerance are rather exceptional. Tolerance is typically presented as a virtue and intolerance as a vice, although in the classical understanding it is recognized that there can be good reasons (e.g. public order, violence) for being intolerant of things that are intolerable: there are always limits to what should be endured or put up with (King, 2012; Popper, 1945). Whereas being tolerant speaks to the moral character of a person, the accusation of being intolerant tends to place a person in an accountable position. Debates about tolerance and intolerance are not only about freedoms and rights but also involve the nature of beliefs and the meaning

of identities. These debates can have real-world consequences, including for the functioning of organizations and institutions, and for educational and professional careers. The debate about Ngole who rejects same-sex marriage because of his religious belief is an illuminating case for examining the ways in which the classical and modern notions of tolerance and intolerance are flexibly used for different argumentative purposes.

2 | THE CASE

Felix Ngole originates from Cameroon and is a devout Christian who was a second-year Master's student on a social work course at Sheffield University. In 2015 he posted a series of comments on Facebook in relation to a prominent news story concerning an American registrar who, because of her religious beliefs, had refused marriage licenses to same-sex couples. After he posted several comments based on his interpretation of the bible (e.g. 'same sex marriage is a sin', 'homosexuality is a sin', 'it is an abomination') these comments were brought anonymously to the attention of the university by another student. What followed was a disciplinary hearing and then an investigation by the Faculty of Social Sciences Fitness to Practise (FTP) Committee. In the meeting with the committee Ngole was asked whether he believed in what he had posted which he saw as a direct attempt by the university to entice him to renounce his faith or censor his deeply held views (Ngole, 2018). The outcome of the investigation was that he was excluded from further study on the course, had to return his university badge, and had his university account terminated. It was ruled that by publicly posting his views Ngole's had been offensive. He also was considered to have damaged public confidence in the profession and compromised his ability to carry out his role as a social worker since service users might perceive him as not treating them with dignity and without discrimination. Ngole appealed to a higher appeal committee in the university on the grounds that the decision was an interference with his rights to freedom of speech and freedom of religion, but the FTP panel's decision was upheld. The judge of appeal argued that the university was not concerned about his religious beliefs but about making these beliefs publicly accessible for service users 'who would perceive them as judgmental, incompatible with service ethos, or suggestive of discriminatory intent'. Subsequently, Ngole appealed the university decision in court and in 2019 the Court ruled that his removal from the course was 'flawed and unfair' and a disproportional restriction of his freedom of expression. The Court remitted his case for reconsideration and a new hearing before a differently constituted FTP Committee.

The case involved university regulations and legal procedures but also sparked a strong public debate about Ngole's fitness to practice as a social worker and whether the university decision was correct. Here I focus on an online debate (10 March 2016) that is publicly available on the forum 'workforce' at https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2016/03/10/views-gay-marriage-shouldnt-stop-social-worker/. The debate started with Ngole explaining his views and accusing the university of being intolerant. There were 75 responses (from March 10 to 13) and some of these were in support of Ngole, others in support of the university decision, and still others expressed a nuanced position. The forum included a poling question and 51.3% agreed that 'expelling this student is the right decision', while 48.7% disagreed. The contributors to the online debate presented their own views and also reacted to previous posts, but I focus on the ways in which the notion of tolerance was flexibly used for arguing against or in favor of Ngole and the decision of the university.

3 | NGOLE'S ACCOUNT: CLASSICAL TOLERANCE

Ngole started his account by explaining that he migrated to Britain because of the opportunities he 'thought it offered' and he draws on the classical understanding of tolerance for explaining his position.

> Britain once led the world in freedom and justice and is iconic in my homeland of Cameroon. So many of us in Cameroon aspire to the kind of possibilities that we believe only Britain can give us. We think of it as a nation that protects freedom of speech, religion and our ability to be who we want to be. It therefore came as quite a shock to find myself expelled from a social work course ... just because I stood up for someone's right to exercise freedom of conscience at work.

Ngole defines British identity in terms of the classical understanding of tolerance in which the protection of individual autonomy is central. His exclusion from the course is shocking because it means that the country does not live up to its own credo of tolerance and religious freedom. He continues with deploying the classical notion of tolerance by making the distinction between respecting people as autonomous human beings while not valuing their beliefs and related practices ('love the sinner, but hate the sin'). Having and expressing strong beliefs does not necessarily mean that one is negative toward others as human beings and that one will not treat them with dignity and respect.

> Just because I disagree with a homosexual lifestyle, it doesn't mean to say that I won't act in a professional, kind and compassionate way when dealing with homosexuals. We all disagree on many, many issues.

In the third part of his account under the heading 'intolerance', Ngole continues to draw upon the classical understanding by arguing that it is not he who is intolerant, but rather the university for its 'new political orthodoxy' that bars religious people and forces them to forswear their beliefs to prevent exclusion.

> They couldn't see the irony of their own intolerance of my views. If this is the way the system operates then it means that people like me and followers of Christ everywhere will be 'barred from professions'; deemed 'not fit for practise'. ...The new political orthodoxy coerces and compels a 'way to think and a way to speak'- if you disagree you're left out in the cold.

4 | MODERN TOLERANCE

The very first reaction to Ngole's account involved a re-interpretation of the notion of tolerance from its classical to its modern meaning. In this post, Ngole is defined as being a homophobe which is equated with being intolerant and as the opposite of full acceptance and appreciation. Disapproval and disagreement with someone's lifestyle is not considered an intrinsic aspect of (classical) tolerance but rather as reflecting a lack of (modern) tolerance which would justify the university's decision.

> Are you really arguing that it's intolerant not to tolerate intolerance? I'm a lesbian, and I'm horrified to learn that my social worker believed my right to marriage should be revoked, and that he disagrees with my lifestyle. The university threw you out for being a homophobe, and not being wise enough to keep it off your public social media.

Other contributors also used this modern, non-judgmental interpretation of tolerance for defining Ngole's belief as being unacceptable ('unfortunately judgmental', 'prejudicial bigotry', 'homophobic bigot') and rejecting the idea that we are dealing with a case of classical tolerance of free speech.

> This is not a free speech issue. A social worker has to demonstrate that they have a non-judgmental attitude to all citizens and do not have prejudicial views about anybody based on their sexuality, gender or any other aspect of their identity.

However, and similar to Ngole accusing the university of being intolerant, it is possible to accuse this modern tolerance for being itself intolerant: 'people holding so called liberal views' would not want to live in a pluralist society, something they accuse religious people of. Rather they would operate as the intolerant 'thought police' that comes down on people with heterodox views 'like a ton of bricks'. In several posts, those supporting the university decision were accused of the bigotry and intolerance that they accused Ngole of ('Haven't you just practiced or condoned the exact same prejudice, bigotry & intolerance you have deemed Mr Ngole unfit to be a social worker?'). The intolerance of this modern intolerance was further contrasted with the preferred classical understanding of tolerance, as is illustrated in the next two extracts.

> So you think Christians are wrong, bigoted, narrow minded or should just keep quiet about everything, politics, sex and religion? If so you prove yourself to be bigoted, narrow minded and just as 'phobic' as you say this chap is! ... Britain is a tolerant nation but that doesn't mean we should all be clones and afraid to speak our minds when it comes to disagreeing with issues that are important to us.

> Wow! I am shocked by the intolerance from so many replies to this story concerning this guys opinion. That's what it boils down to. His opinion means he doesn't agree with sodomy. That doesn't make him homophobic or a bigot. ... Talk about hateful. If he's a Christian, he's not going to compromise his faith on this or is that something you'd frog march him into doing? To what degree would you tolerate Christians and their faith when it comes to sexual disagreements? Your answers speak volumes for your tolerance.

5 | PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AND (IN)TOLERANCE

Those who agreed with the university decision did not only draw on the modern discourse of tolerance as being non-judgmental and appreciative, but also discussed reasonable limits to classical tolerance for supporting and justifying the decision. The argument for classical tolerance in society (e.g. equal citizenship rights, free speech) does not similarly apply to, for example, a church, a political movement or a professional organizations. Collectives of these kind have

reason to exclude those who disagree with their core values, principles and aims because they would lose their point if they had to include all divergent views (Scanlon, 2003). Thus, organizations and professional bodies are entitled to place restrictions on those subject to their professional code, as was argued by the Court of Appeal in Ngole's case. The very meaning of social work is dependent on upholding the values and principles of the profession as laid down in the Code of Ethics for Social Work. So it would be acceptable to exclude someone who lacks these beliefs and therefore breach the professional guidelines, which would make this case an example of classical tolerance in which there are good reasons to limit what is tolerable (Verkuyten et al., 2020).

This argument was put forward by the university and expressed in several posts in which it was explained that Ngole's beliefs 'are not compatible with social work', 'not compatible with carrying out the duties of a professional social worker', and 'throws the profession into disrepute if you are then allowed to practice within it'. The next extract is a further example in which freedom of consciousness is acknowledged but professional ethics are considered more important.

> You were trained to be a social worker – have you not read the ethics and values embedded into your chosen profession?? How can you possibly support people from the communities your bible tells you are an abomination or whatever you call it. Yes they are your views, yes everyone is entitled to follow religion but perhaps you should of thought seriously about this before you decided a career in social work.

However, supporters of Ngole pointed out that the social work code of ethics 'ONLY addresses actions and behaviour, and not beliefs', and that the development of autonomous thinking and classical tolerance are actually required in social worker. The next extract is an example.

> I am anti-abortion but this has never altered how I work with women who have had terminations or are planning them. We can hold personal views and successfully work from a professional value base. I work with people who have religious conviction they do not personally agree with same sex marriage but it does not impact on their work. Social work is in danger if we cannot tolerate different views.

Various examples were given in arguing that strong beliefs do not contradict the profession: 'Although different, I often work with pedophiles and sex offenders and still deliver a service to the level as I would anyone else'. Different contributors to the discussion agreed with Ngole's argument in terms of classical tolerance: having and expressing strong beliefs does not necessarily mean that one is negative toward others as human beings and will not treat them with dignity and respect ('He DISAGREES with the lifestyle of lesbian and gays. Did he say he hates LGBT's? No he didn't'). The next extract is an example.

> How can people be so blind not to see that disagreeing with somethings is not the same as hating a person who does it. If parents hate that a kid did something they disagree with it does not mean that they will hate the kid. What evidence is there that if Felix states that he disagrees with homosexuality it will mean that he will refuse to provide proper service to homosexual clients?

6 | HOLDING A BELIEF, EXPRESSING IT, AND ACTING UPON IT

The previous section indicates that a distinction can be made between what other people think, say and do. Relatedly the sense in which people are asked to be tolerant can relate to dissenting beliefs, the public expression of those beliefs, and the practices based on those beliefs. Already children have been found to be more (classical) tolerant of people holding dissenting beliefs than of publicly expressing these beliefs, and to be least tolerant of belief-based behaviors (Wainryb et al., 2001; Witenberg, 2002). It is one thing to tolerate particular beliefs (against same-sex marriage) and something else to accept people expressing and acting on these beliefs (discriminatory conduct). Having particular beliefs can be considered a personal matter that does not need to have negative consequences for others, while the public expression of dissenting beliefs and the related practices might have more negative implications.

Those who supported the university decision did not deny the right of people to hold their own religious beliefs and the need to tolerate these ('yes everyone is entitled to follow religion'). Freedom of belief and the importance of individual autonomy were affirmed by all, including the FTP committee. However, in Ngole's case this classical argument for tolerance was challenged in three ways.

First, it was questioned whether Ngole's belief was a genuine reflection of moral autonomy. Rather his religious belief would be the result of indoctrination ('formed through indoctrination from religious leaders who hold these prejudices') or used as 'a cover or excuse to promote discrimination'. Hence, this would not be a case of tolerance and affirming Ngole's freedom of conscience because the expression of his belief would not reflect his moral autonomy.

Second, it was argued that tolerating Ngole's belief is something else than tolerating its public expression on social media. The former can be accepted but the latter would go against professional rules. The public posting on facebook would mean that service users will have less confidence and trust in him and 'cannot reasonably expect equitable treatment'. Or as stated in one post: 'I am afraid you can't square your private beliefs expressed in a public forum with your public duties as a social worker'.

Third, it was argued that sincere beliefs will inevitably inform one's behavior and therefore that these beliefs will interfere with interactions and relations with clients and service users ('How can he say his views will not affect his practice? He would not put the rights of a gay person over his own religious beliefs, as he states how important it is to him'). It would even be dishonest and detrimental for the therapeutic relationship to not act on the basis of one's beliefs, as explained in the next extract.

> It is my experience that the one thing my clients have wanted from me is to be genuine in my support of them; that what I believe, who I am, is consistent with how I am with them. How can anyone hold strong views on gay marriage or abortion and not have them colour (I originally wrote 'taint', which is, I think, more apposite) their interactions with their clients? It's hypocritical and dishonest on the deepest level and any therapeutic relationship will be rotten at its core.

7 | DISCUSSION

Many organisations and institutions promote and embrace tolerance as a response to the increasing diversity in western societies. However, the notion of tolerance has been criticized, has various meanings, and lends itself to various discursive usages (Brown, 2006; Verkuyten & Kollar, 2021). Tolerance can be understood in its classical meaning of enduring things that one disapproves of, or in its modern sense of being non-judgmental and appreciating a myriad of differences. These different meanings can be discursively deployed for arguing in favour as well as against particular developments, situations and decisions. In the case of Ngole, he himself and his supporters used the classical understanding of tolerance to argue against the university decision to exclude him from the social worker course. This understanding implies a commitment to one's own beliefs together with treating people with opposing viewpoints with human dignity and respect. The classical understanding affirms individual autonomy and freedom of conscience of oneself and of others. In this understanding it is intolerant if one tries to prevent people to exercise their conscience. Ngole and his supporters accused the university and those who agreed with the university decision of being intolerant by demanding a 'new political orthodox' way of thinking and speaking. Thus, they deployed the classical understanding of tolerance by arguing that the university and those who agreed are the real intolerant ones because they negatively interfere with others' personal autonomy and right of free speech.

In contrast, those who agreed with the university drew upon the modern understanding of toleration as being non-judgmental, and valuing and celebrating diversity and minority identities in particular. They argued that one should be sensitive to anything that might cause offense to vulnerable minorities which would be a sign of intolerance and therefore should not be accepted but rather silenced or banished (Campbell & Manning, 2018). They accused Ngole of being intolerant in the sense of being prejudicial, homophobic, and discriminatory.

However, the university supporters also engaged with the classical understanding of tolerance since the emphasis on individual autonomy, freedom of belief and dealing with moral complexities corresponds with important social work requirements (Fenton & Smith, 2019). For justifying their own position in the debate, they interpreted classical tolerance in different ways. First, they drew upon the notion that classical tolerance always has limits in that one should not tolerate what is reasonably considered intolerable (King, 2012; Popper, 1945). Thus, it was argued that it is not intolerant for professional bodies and organizations to place restrictions on those subject to professional codes and guidelines. These codes and guidelines would define the very nature and meaning of the profession and thereby provide adequate grounds for excluding those who disagree. Second, they countered the classical tolerant argument against the university decision by questioning the sincerity of Ngole's religious beliefs. They argued that tolerating his beliefs does not have to imply that one should tolerate the public expression of his beliefs, and that his beliefs will inevitably and negatively affect his social work practice.

I have discussed different understandings of tolerance and different ways in which this notion can be discursively used by different actors to define normative practices and construe professional identities. The notions of tolerance and intolerance were flexibly used in arguing about the nature of religious belief and its professional impact. The focus was on one particular case that provides an illumination of the ways in which the different understanding can be employed in the broader context of 'cultural wars' and 'identity politics' around free speech, moral autonomy, equality, offense and harm. There are many cases in which people are accused of being prejudiced, a bigot, or homophobic for having heterodox beliefs and for disapproving of the views and practices of others. In societal debates and educational, organizational and professional settings,

the modern understanding of (in)tolerance seems to have replaced the classical understanding of not interfering with views and practices that contradicts one's own beliefs (Furedi, 2011; Weissberg, 2008). However, proponents of modern tolerance can be accused of censoring others, undermining critical thinking, closing down legitimate debate, and denying others their moral autonomy and freedom of conscience.

The discourse of tolerance can be flexibly used to serve various purposes and there are other issues that I did not address but that can be important in similar debates. For instance, tolerance can be understood and presented as being domain and situation specific (Chanley, 1994). People might understand and discuss questions of tolerance in professional bodies and organizations differently than in their personal lives or in society more broadly (Vogt, 1997). Furthermore, the discourse of tolerance can be deployed differently by those who tolerate (e.g. Christian social workers) and those who are tolerated (e.g. homosexuals). The former might consider classical tolerance as an adequate response to diversity and differences, while the latter might consider it as inescapably patronizing and offensive because it implies disapproval of who and what they are (Marcuse, 1969; Verkuyten & Kollar, 2021).

The growing diversity of societies and in organizations and institutions inevitably raises difficult questions about substantial moral differences. Tolerance is an important answer to these questions (Furedi, 2011) but the power of the toleration discourse depends on the meanings that are presented, the ways in which these are used, and for which purposes. Tolerance is a discourse that has different meanings which can be flexibly used for different ends in debates about contentious issues, and for justifying or criticizing impactful decisions in society, in organizations and institutions, and for personal lives and professional careers.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
There are no data for this paper.

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