

Tolerance

Is the Bar too Low, or Just High Enough?

By
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Whatever happened leading to the terrible violence against (church member) Jacob Johns this week, leaving him in critical condition and needing to undergo multiple surgeries, I'm certain it was an act of extreme intolerance on the part of the angry young man who shot him. I could not have foreseen that something like this would happen to one of our own members when I planned to give this sermon a month ago, but this kind of gun violence, which has been routine in U.S. society far too long due to the negligence, in this case, of the Republican party, such overt instances of intolerance can happen anywhere in the nation these days at almost any time, and will continue to do so until there is a renewed commitment to this most important of all societal necessities—tolerance.

It is hard to have even a modicum of hope that such a renaissance might occur, given all the hate and division in our society today, yet I think most people do value this principle and want a tolerant and peaceful world, no matter their politics. For example, I'm sure you're familiar with the "coexist" bumper sticker that's spelled out with different religious symbols. The C is the Islamic crescent moon, the P is the peace sign, the E is the equality symbol, the X is the Star of David, the I, representing individuality, is dotted with a Wiccan pentacle, the S is the Taoist Yin/Yang mandala, and the T is the Christian cross. Since the year 2000, when it was developed by a graphic designer in Poland (as part of an International contest organized by the Museum on the Seam for Dialogue, Understanding, and Coexistence located in Jerusalem), *COEXIST* has become the most popular and familiar bumper sticker in the world—surpassing the popularity of the "baby on board" and "my child is an honor student at (name of school)" bumpers stickers that were the most popular in the 1980s and 90s. That says something doesn't it, that in addition to loving our kids, most of us want to promote living peacefully with others no matter how different we are.

But on the other hand, Peggy and I saw a bumper sticker just the other day that looked almost identical to the COEXIST decal, but, instead, the various symbols were used to spell out "convert." At the bottom, in smaller print, was a quote from the *Gospel of John*, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man cometh to the Father but by me." I don't know or judge the intentions of the vehicle's driver, who may consider it a funny and clever way to express pride in his or her own faith, but for me it was a statement reflective of self-righteousness and the intolerance that comes along with it. Hopefully we won't be seeing many of these bumper stickers on our streets.

But this example does help make the point I want to address, that tolerance is not a value everyone shares and, considering the state of the world these days, it appears those of us who do, often find it easier to put on the back of our cars than to put into practice. Surely there are many behaviors we cannot tolerate, which is why we have laws. But speech, beliefs, and books should not be among the things we won't tolerate, especially not in a society that tolerates civilians owning weapons of mass destruction. Yet, increasingly, it is the free flow of ideas that is forbidden, even as the shootings and killings are allowed to continue on a daily basis.

Some might say I'm intolerant of Republicans. I'm not. I have many friends who are Republicans. But I do disagree with many of the GOP's positions, especially those that prevent us from doing

anything meaningful to prevent mass murder and Global Warming, two of the deadliest matters in the world. Saying so doesn't make me intolerant. It is part of the important dialogue that must be allowed in a sane and functional society. Those who think tolerance means keeping our mouths shut to keep the peace, or so that we don't upset those who disagree with us, are enabling the behavior, not tolerating it. Toleration is not masochism.

Today, many institutions on the left, those once devoted to promoting tolerant societies based upon the truth of our universal and common humanity—the inherent worth and dignity of every person—have become intolerant of anyone who says anything they disagree with, and rush to destroy their characters and careers to discredit and silence them. Whether it is Fox News or MSNBC using traditional media, or the masses turning to social media, the tools of intolerance, used to demonize and displatform ideological opponents, are widely used on both the Right and the Left of things. Rather than engaging in dialogue by tolerating and, thus, entertaining the potential value of ideas not our own, we draw deep lines in the sand and isolate ourselves in echo chambers before they can ever get to us.

In politics it's particularly rare to see any hint of tolerance for the opposition party. It is more usual to seize the slightest opportunity to take advantage of any gaff, any stumble an opponent makes, or to intentionally misrepresent or misconstrue what an opponent says, or to blow the importance of their mistakes far out of proportion. Today, for example, I regularly hear people say President Biden is obviously senile, incoherent, and incompetent, as proven by brief soundbites lifted out of context in which he stutters, or videos of him falling or staring blankly for a few seconds. I can tell you, if anyone follows me around with a camera all day there will be plenty of opportunity to portray me in such a light, too, as I suspect is true for most of us. Yet I also hear his longer speeches, his press conferences, and his interviews, in which he sounds perfectly present and rational.

Contrast this with the President's own response to those disturbing videos most of us saw of Senator Mitch McConnell in recent weeks becoming unresponsive during two separate press conferences, following a serious head injury. This would have been the perfect opportunity for Biden to counterpunch and take advantage of his powerful opponent. Instead, I was almost moved to tears by the response he gave when asked for his comments on the matter during an August 30th press conference. "I just heard, literally coming out, and Mitch is a friend, as you know. Not a joke—I know people don't believe that's the case when we have disagreements politically, but he's a good friend. So, I'm going to try to get in touch with him later this afternoon. I don't know enough to know."

A couple days later, he was asked if he'd had a chance to speak to McConnell. "Yes, I have," he said. "I spoke to Mitch and he's a friend and I spoke to him today. And you know, he was his old self on the telephone. And having a little understanding of dealing with neurosurgeons—and one of the leading women in my staff, her husband is a neurosurgeon as well—it is not at all unusual to have a response that sometimes happens to Mitch when you've had a severe concussion. It's part of the recovery. And so, I'm confident he's going to be back to his old self." Then, when asked if he had any concerns about McConnell's ability to do his job, Biden said resoundingly, "No I don't."

To me, the President's presidential response is a sign of his sanity, not his senility. If only his opponents would show an inkling of such respect for *his* inherent worth and dignity. More

importantly, if only more of us would show the same respect, the same degree of tolerance, toward those with whom we disagree. *Coexist* doesn't belong merely on the back of our cars where it's meant for others to see. We need to keep it in front of ourselves to continually remind us of how central this principle is to a peaceful, civil, and productive society.

Let's take a little time understanding this value that so many of us now believe in, aspire toward, and, at the very least, want to remind others of. Tolerance is one of the core ideas that emerged during the Renaissance in reaction against Church orthodoxy and its brutal enforcement, a value that would soon become indicative of Enlightenment liberalism. Prior to this, the idea of tolerating different ideas was considered unthinkable. As historian Richie Robertson says in his 2021 book on *The Enlightenment*, "Through many centuries, intolerance seemed a virtue ... It was no kindness to indulge people in error that would lead to damnation."¹

The notion of tolerance was initially so offensive that its mere mention could get a person in hot water, literally during Medieval times. Toleration was seen as traitorous. At the time, Christendom had been torn apart by the Reformation, which had led to all kinds of religious wars and cruelties. There was much animosity between the religious sects, and they were terrified of outsiders. The 17th century Anglican preacher Edward Stillingfleet likened tolerance to a Trojan Horse "which brings in our *Enemies* without being seen."²

Additionally, Robertson says, "Toleration was also considered wrong in principle, as it implied indifference to divine truth and disregard for ecclesiastical authority."³ This, I imagine, is the sentiment behind the "convert" bumper sticker I previously mentioned. Back then, preventing violence and conflict depended on orthodoxy, not heterodoxy. It depended upon groupthink and intolerance. Tolerance was considered an obvious evil that only fools, or wicked people would want.

Yet, after a century of brutal war and conflict between the Catholics and Protestants, and the Protestants and the Protestants, leaving tens to hundreds of thousand dead, and to the ruin of their homes and lands, it became obvious forcing everyone to believe the same thing wasn't possible. "By the onset of the Enlightenment," Robertson says, "it was increasingly felt that ways must be found for adherents of different religions to live together, if not harmoniously, then at least without open conflict."⁴

Even so, it would take hundreds of years for the idea of tolerance to become what it means for us today—namely that we should treat everyone with respect no matter our differences, and that we should all enjoy the same rights and privileges. At first, toleration may have been granted to certain groups, meaning they would not be killed, but it also meant their ideas and ways were not approved of—kind of the way gays were treated in our modern society until only recently. "Don't ask, don't tell."

Those of marginal faiths were tolerated by the authorities, but they didn't have the same freedoms as everyone else. A 1598 French law, where Catholics dominated, granted Protestants freedom but also required them to "observe Catholic Holidays, obey Catholic laws regarding marriage and contracts, and submit every book they printed to censorship."⁵ Things only worsened from there. Twenty-four years later, the French Protestants were no longer allowed to hold burials during the day, and they were no longer allowed to have government representatives. Marriage between

Protestants and Catholics became illegal. Protestant women could not be midwives. Protestant could not practice law or medicine, and soldiers were sent to occupy their homes and communities. They weren't even free to emigrate elsewhere, and those who defied the bans had their belongings confiscated.

Things were similar in the Dutch Republic where the Dutch Reform Church was the official religion. Other religions were tolerated, but toleration meant Catholics could not hold public office, nor build their own churches, but, for a fee, could hold their services in buildings that were not considered churches. Robertson says, "it was very limited liberty that allowed them to attend Mass only in private houses and usually under cover of darkness."⁶ Although the Dutch tolerated other religions to the same degree, they considered Socinianism, which was the precursor of Unitarianism, "an intolerable heresy."⁷ So we weren't even tolerated enough to receive second class status, or any status at all.

Some years earlier, in 1553, Unitarianism's founder, Michael Servetus was burned at the stake, the fire stoked by his own writings questioning Trinitarian doctrine. His martyrdom caused Unitarians to shun such intolerance from the religion's inception. It became so important that historian Earl Morse Willbur summarized Unitarianism by its "fundamental *principles* of freedom, reason and tolerance,"⁸ adding that, "the first and most essential of its three controlling principles ... is that of generous tolerance of differing views."⁹

This is why after Hungarian King John Sigismund Zápolya became a Unitarian his first act was to pass the first religious toleration law in history, the Edict of Torda in 1568. Rather than commanding that all his subjects become Unitarian, like their King, the Edict stated that "no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone ... and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching." The Unitarians were ahead of their time and, unfortunately, King Sigismund's progressive social experiment was short lived due to his accidental death, at which time the Catholics took over and immediately passed an anti-innovation law, prohibiting any new ideas that hadn't already been expressed when the Edict was still in place.

It wouldn't be until the Enlightenment was in full force that this principle would again come to reflect the scope Unitarianism gave it in the 16th century. Philosopher John Locke, for example, began his 1689 essay, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, saying, "I esteem that toleration to be the chief characteristic mark of the true church."¹⁰ I'm quite sure he didn't have a coexist bumper stick on the back of his horse drawn carriage, but its message is similar to Locke's belief that religions, of all institutions, ought to be defined by ideological tolerance. Those who only emphasize their own orthodox beliefs, Locke said, are simply "striving for power and empire over one another,"¹¹ are destitute of any charity, meekness, or goodwill, including for "those who are not Christians," and, thus, fall short of being true Christians themselves. (I would be remiss not to point out that what Locke said then is true today of many Unitarian Universalists whose postmodern orthodoxy has caused them to become authoritarian and "destitute of charity, meekness, and goodwill" toward those who do not share their perspective.)

This broader understanding of tolerance was much better than that of the Renaissance Catholics and Protestants, but Robertson says arguments like it "still assume that toleration is something undesirable," that it would still be better if everyone agreed about everything. "It is not yet an

argument against interfering with the sanctity of the individual conscience¹² ... what one misses above all in Locke's argument is a sense that there is anything morally wrong with intolerance, or a sense of any deep concern for the victims of persecution or the moral insult that is involved in the attempt to manipulate their faith."¹³

It would be another century before philosopher Emmanuel Kant would renounce what he called, "the arrogant title of *tolerance*"¹⁴ precisely because it did not require us to advocate for the rights and freedoms of those we disagree with. For Kant, it isn't enough to merely tolerate those we disagree with. We must fully accept them as equals, as citizens, and, hopefully, as neighbors. Preachers and scholars should be free to continue publicly disagreeing but when it comes to laws and governments, it is their task, Kant says, "to leave everyone free to use [one's] own reason in all matters of conscience."¹⁵

After Kant, the French Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire began campaigning against intolerance as immoral.

It does not require any great art or studied elocution to prove that Christians ought to tolerate one another. Nay, I shall go still farther and say that we ought to look upon all men as our brethren. How! call a Turk, a Jew, and a Siamese, my brother? Yes, doubtless; for are we not all children of the same parent, and the creatures of the same Creator?¹⁶

Hence, the concept of intolerance completely flipped. It had initially been considered good and moral, and tolerance an obvious evil. Then tolerance became a necessary evil enabling us to keep the peace, even if some were still discriminated against. Finally, tolerance becomes the obvious good, and intolerance the obvious evil. At this point, Robertson says, "The reluctance that is implied in tolerance has been dropped: toleration has mutated into acceptance."¹⁷

This is what this cornerstone of our liberal religion—Unitarianism—is supposed to mean for us, and what it meant to the Enlightenment liberals who fashioned our modern democracies. Hence, this broader and advanced understanding of tolerance is also what it ought to mean for us as North Americans. It doesn't mean we have to agree with everyone, nor even like everyone, but it does mean we must live peacefully with them and allow them to enjoy the same freedoms and rights as we wish for ourselves. It even means we must fight for them to have those freedoms and rights if necessary. It means treating them with dignity.

Does this modern idea of tolerance raise the bar too high? Or is it just high enough? Should we only refrain from killing each other while we go on hating one another? Or must we guarantee, protect, and value the rights and dignity of those we disagree with? Do we convert or do we coexist? Which bumper sticker belongs on the back of our cars? Which value do we keep before us?

I have a dear friend, Carl, who is a conservative Christian. We have different religious and political beliefs, yet we delight in each other's company. When I struggle to understand these deeper questions of life, I turn to philosophy and psychology and science. Carl turns to theology, the Bible, and prayer. Yet, in our own way, we arrive at the same place. Some time ago Carl was bothered by nonbelievers, and he wanted to find a message of unity for them. He prayed that night for guidance, went to sleep, and awoke in the night with a statement in his head that he jumped out of bed to write down:

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Most of all whom you've condemned shall one day be with me in paradise. While they have chosen a different path to Me than the one you've felt important for them to take, their hearts are just right. So, replace your unauthorized judgements with the same love that I continue to share with you each day, for in such love there is no error, only good.

Carl considers this universalistic message to have come from the Holy Spirit. I call it the spirit of wholeness, reflective of the unity he was seeking. We may not all agree on a lot of things, but we share this same value, this same understanding of what tolerance is supposed to mean in a modern society. We cannot hate our way into the perfect world we want. Hate only guarantees we'll never get there and that we'll remain stuck in a perpetual cycle of incivility, violence, and stagnation, as well as potential suffering, loss, and grief. It is only through allowing, valuing, and protecting the freedom and rights of everyone, no matter how much we may differ, to freely express their beliefs that together human society can thrive. As Immanuel Kant once wrote, "The *public* use of one's reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among mankind."¹⁸ We need another Enlightenment, and it can only begin with tolerance.

¹ Robertson, Richie, *The Enlightenment*, HarperCollins, New York, NY, 2021, p. 88.

² Ibid., p. 89.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p.

⁵ Ibid., p. 91.

⁶ Ibid., p. 94.

⁷ Ibid., p. 96.

⁸ Morse, Earl Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1945, p. 208.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Locke, John, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, Huddersfield, Printed for the Editor by J. Brook, 1796, p. 5.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Robertson, *ibid.*, p. 111.

¹³ Ibid., p. 113.

¹⁴ Kant, Immanuel, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* Konigsberg in Prussia, 30 September 1784

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Voltaire. *Treatise on Tolerance*: From the French writer, historian and philosopher, famous for his wit, his attacks on the established Catholic Church, and his advocacy ... of religion and freedom of expression (p. 87), Kindle Edition

¹⁷ Robertson, *ibid.*, p. 132.

¹⁸ Kant, Immanuel, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* Konigsberg in Prussia, September 30, 1784.