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THE MYTH OF TOLERANCE

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One word can stop you in your tracks when you seek to “give an account for the hope that is in you” as an ambassador for Christ. That word is “tolerance.”

This idea is especially popular with postmodernists — that breed of radical skeptics whose ideas command unwarranted respect in the university today. Their rallying cry, “There is no truth,” is often followed by an appeal for tolerance.

The tolerant person allegedly occupies neutral ground, a place of complete impartiality where each individual is permitted to decide for him or herself. No judgments allowed. No “forcing” personal views. That all views are equally valid is one of the most entrenched assumptions of a society committed to relativism; but it’s a myth!

For all their confident bluster, the relativists’ appeal actually asserts two principles or “truths,” one rational and one moral. The first is the rational “truth” that there is no truth. The second is the moral “truth” that one ought to tolerate the viewpoints of others. Their stand, contradictory on at least two counts, serves as a warning that the modern notion of tolerance is seriously misguided.

The Tolerance Trick. As it turns out, by the modern definition of tolerance *no one* is tolerant, or ever can be. It’s what my friend Francis Beckwith calls the “passive-aggressive tolerance trick.” Returning to the classic understanding of tolerance is the only way to restore any useful meaning to the word. Allow me to give you a real-life example.

Earlier this year I spoke to a class of seniors at a Christian high school in Des Moines, Iowa. I wanted to alert them to this “tolerance trick,” but I also wanted to learn how much they had already been taken in by it. I began by writing two sentences on the board. The first expressed the current understanding of tolerance:

“All views have equal merit, and none should be considered better than another.”

All heads nodded in agreement. Nothing controversial here. Then I wrote the second sentence:

“Jesus is the Messiah, and Judaism is wrong for rejecting Him.”

Immediately hands flew up. “You can’t say that,” a coed challenged, clearly annoyed. “That’s disrespectful. How would you like it if someone said you were wrong?”

“In fact, that happens to me all the time,” I pointed out, “including right now with you. But why should it bother me that someone thinks I’m wrong?”

“It’s intolerant,” she said, noting that the second statement violated the first statement. What she didn’t see was that the first statement also violated itself.

I pointed to the first statement and asked, “Is this a view, the idea that all views have equal merit and none should be considered better than another?” They all agreed.

Then I pointed to the second statement — the “intolerant” one — and asked the same question: “Is *this* a view?” They studied the sentence for a moment. Slowly my point began to dawn on them. They had been taken in by the tolerance trick.

If all views have equal merit, then the view that Christians have a better view on Jesus than the Jews have is just as true as the idea that Jews have a better view on Jesus than the Christians do; but this is hopelessly contradictory. If the first statement is what tolerance amounts to, then no one can be tolerant because “tolerance” turns out to be gibberish.

Escaping the Trap. “Would you like to know how to get out of this dilemma?” I asked. They nodded. “You must reject this modern distortion of tolerance and return to the classic view.” Then I wrote these two principles on the board:

Be egalitarian regarding persons.
Be elitist regarding ideas.¹

“Egalitarian” was a new word for them. “Think equal,” I said. “Treat others as having equal standing in value or worth.” They knew what an elitist was, though, someone who thought he or she was better than others. “Right,” I said. “When you are elitist regarding ideas, you are acknowledging that some ideas are better than others; and they are. We don’t treat all ideas as if they have the same merit, lest we run into contradiction. Some ideas are good. Some are bad. Some are true. Some are false. Some are brilliant. Others are just plain foolish.”

The first principle, what might be called “civility,” is at the heart of the classical view of tolerance. It can be loosely equated with the word “respect.” Tolerance applies to how we treat *people* we disagree with, not how we treat *ideas* we think are false. We respect those who hold different beliefs from our own by treating such people courteously and allowing their views a place in the public discourse. We may strongly disagree with their ideas and vigorously contend against them in the public square, but we still show respect to their persons despite our differences. Classic tolerance requires that every *person* be treated courteously with the freedom to express his or her ideas without fear of reprisal no matter what the view, not that all *views* have equal worth, merit, or truth.

These two categories are frequently conflated in the muddled thinking created by the myth of tolerance. The view that one person’s ideas are no better or truer than another’s is simply absurd and inescapably self-contradictory. To argue that some views are false, immoral, or just plain silly does not violate any meaningful definition or standard of tolerance.

Topsy-Turvy. The modern definition of tolerance turns the classical formula for tolerance on its head:

Be egalitarian regarding ideas.
Be elitist regarding persons.

If you reject another’s *ideas*, you’re automatically accused of disrespecting the *person* (as the coed did with me). In this new view of tolerance, no idea or behavior can be opposed — even if done graciously — without inviting the charge of incivility.

To say I’m intolerant of the person because I disagree with his or her ideas is confused; ironically, it results in elitism regarding persons. If I think my *ideas* are better than another’s, I can be ill-treated as a *person*, publicly marginalized, and verbally abused as bigoted, disrespectful, ignorant, indecent, and (can you believe it?) intolerant. Sometimes I can even be sued, punished by law, or forced to attend re-education programs.²

In this way, tolerance has gone topsy-turvy: Tolerate most beliefs, but don’t tolerate (show respect for) those who take exception with those beliefs. Contrary opinions are labeled as “imposing your view on others” and quickly silenced.

This is nonsense and should be abandoned. The myth of tolerance forces everyone into an inevitable “Catch-22,” because each person in any debate has a point of view he or she thinks is correct.

Catch-22. Classical tolerance involves three elements: (1) permitting or allowing (2) a conduct or point of view one disagrees with (3) while respecting the person in the process. Notice that we can’t truly tolerate someone *unless* we disagree with him or her. This is critical. We don’t “tolerate” people who share our views. They’re on our side. There’s nothing with which we need to put up. Tolerance is reserved for those we think are wrong, yet we still choose to treat decently and with respect.

This essential element of classical tolerance — disagreement (elitism regarding ideas) — has been completely lost in the modern distortion of the concept. Nowadays if you think someone is wrong, you're called intolerant no matter how you treat the person.

This presents a curious problem. In order to exercise true tolerance, one must first think another is wrong, yet saying so brings the accusation of intolerance. It's a "Catch-22." According to this approach, true tolerance becomes impossible.

Intellectual Cowardice. Most of what passes for tolerance today is little more than intellectual cowardice — a fear of intelligent engagement. Those who brandish the word "intolerant" are unwilling to be challenged by other views or grapple with contrary opinions, or even to consider them. It's easier to hurl an insult — "you intolerant bigot" — than to confront an idea and either refute it or be changed by it. In the modern era, "tolerance" has become intolerance.

As ambassadors for Christ, we choose the more courageous path, "destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God" (2 Cor. 10:5; NASB). Whenever you're charged with intolerance, *always ask for a definition*. When tolerance means neutrality, that all views are equally valid and true, then no one is ever tolerant because no one is ever neutral about his or her own views. Point out the contradiction built into the new definition. Point out that this kind of tolerance is a myth.

-- Gregory Koukl

NOTES

1. This way of putting it comes from Peter Kreeft of Boston College.
2. This has happened in a number of communities regarding the homosexuality issue.