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DECONSTRUCTING LIBERAL TOLERANCE

by Francis J. Beckwith

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SYNOPSIS

Liberal Tolerance is perhaps the primary challenge to the Christian worldview current in North American popular culture. Proponents of this viewpoint argue that it is intolerant and inconsistent with the principles of a free and open society for Christians (and others) to claim that their moral and religious perspective is correct and ought to be embraced by all citizens. Liberal tolerance is not what it appears to be, however. It is a partisan philosophical perspective with its own set of dogmas. It assumes, for instance, a relativistic view of moral and religious knowledge. This assumption has shaped the way many people think about issues such as homosexuality, abortion rights, and religious truth claims, leading them to believe that a liberally tolerant posture concerning these issues is the correct one and that it ought to be reflected in our laws and customs. But this posture is dogmatic, intolerant, and coercive, for it asserts that there is only one correct view on these issues, and if one does not comply with it, one will face public ridicule, demagogic tactics, and perhaps legal reprisals. Liberal Tolerance is neither liberal nor tolerant.

Our assessments of the future are always at the mercy of unexpected contingencies. Perhaps, like the Berlin Wall, current academic and cultural fads that challenge Christian orthodoxy will soon crumble by the sheer force of their internal contradictions, coupled by the ascendancy of both the vibrant movement of Christian thinkers within the discipline of philosophy and the growing criticism of Darwinism and naturalism by Phillip Johnson and others. Perhaps. But barring such a near-miraculous cultural turnaround, I offer a number of observations. This article will suggest some ways that Christian thinkers and cultural critics may defend their faith if present trends continue.

First, do you remember the words of John Lennon, put to song in the mid-1970s?

*Imagine there's no heaven; It's easy if you try
No hell below us; Above us only sky....
Imagine no possessions; It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for; And no religion too
You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one
Someday you'll join us, and the world will be as one.*

Those who came of age under the tutelage of Lennon and his contemporaries are now dominant in our most prestigious institutions of cultural influence: law, education, the media, and the social sciences. Although the optimism of these former flower children may be waning, their totalitarian impulses, implied in Lennon's call for global unanimity on matters controversial, are in full bloom. We will call their project *liberal tolerance*.

RELATIVISM: THE GROUND OF LIBERAL TOLERANCE

Liberal tolerance is grounded in *relativism*, the view that no one point of view on moral and religious knowledge is objectively correct for every person in every time and place. This notion, as understood and embraced in popular culture, feeds on the fact of *pluralism*, the reality of a plurality of different and contrary opinions on religious and moral matters. Against this backdrop, many in our culture conclude that one cannot say that one's view on religious and moral matters is better than anyone else's view. They assert that it is a mistake to claim that one's religious beliefs are exclusively correct and that believers in other faiths, no matter how sincere or devoted, hold false beliefs. Thus, *religious inclusivism* is the correct position to hold.

Relativism, pluralism, and religious inclusivism are the planks in a creed that does not tolerate any rivals. Its high-minded commitment to "openness" prohibits the possibility that anything is absolutely good, true, and beautiful. This was the central thesis of Alan Bloom's 1987 best seller, *The Closing of the American Mind*. Bloom writes: "The relativity of truth [for college students in American culture] is not a theoretical insight but a moral postulate, the condition of a free society, or so they see it.... The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all. The students, of course, cannot defend their opinion. It is something with which they have been indoctrinated...."¹

According to Bloom, by dogmatically maintaining there is no truth, people who are relativists have become close-minded to the possibility of knowing the truth, if in fact it does exist. To understand what Bloom means, consider the following dialogue (based loosely on a real-life exchange) between a high school teacher and her student, Elizabeth:²

Teacher: *Welcome, students. Since this is the first day of class, I want to lay down some ground rules. First, since no one has the truth, you should be open-minded to the opinions of your fellow students. Second....Elizabeth, do you have a question?*

Elizabeth: *Yes, I do. If nobody has the truth, isn't that a good reason for me not to listen to my fellow students? After all, if nobody has the truth, why should I waste my time listening to other people and their opinions. What would be the point? Only if somebody has the truth does it make sense to be open-minded. Don't you agree?*

Teacher: *No, I don't. Are you claiming to know the truth? Isn't that a bit arrogant and dogmatic?*

Elizabeth: *Not at all. Rather, I think it's dogmatic, as well as arrogant, to assert that there is not one person on earth who knows the truth. After all, have you met every person in the world and quizzed them exhaustively? If not, how can you make such a claim? Also, I believe it is actually the opposite of arrogance to say that I will alter my opinions to fit the truth whenever and wherever I find it. And if I happen to think that I have good reason to believe I do know the truth and would like to share it with you, why won't you listen to me? Why would you automatically discredit my opinion before it is even uttered? I thought we were supposed to listen to everyone's opinion.*

Teacher: *This should prove to be an interesting semester.*

Another student: *(blurts out): Ain't that the truth. (the students laugh)*

The proponent of liberal tolerance, it turns out, is not the celebrant of diversity he portrays himself to be. Perhaps another example, one from popular culture, will be instructive. In 1997, in her acceptance speech for an Emmy for cowriting the "coming out" episode of *Ellen*, Ellen DeGeneres said, "I accept this on behalf of all people, and the teen-agers out there especially, who think there is something wrong with them because they are gay. There's nothing wrong with you. Don't ever let anybody make you feel ashamed of who you are."

There are many who, after hearing or reading Ellen's speech, applauded her for her liberal sensibilities, concluding that the actress is an open and tolerant person who is merely interested in helping young people better understand their own sexuality. If you think this way, you are mistaken. Ellen's speech is an example of what I call "passive-aggressive tyranny." The trick is to sound "passive" and accepting of

“diversity” while at the same time putting forth an aggressively partisan agenda and implying that those who disagree are not only stupid but also harmful. In order to understand this point, imagine if a conservative Christian Emmy-award winner had said, “I accept this on behalf of all people, and the teenagers out there especially, who think there is something wrong with them because they believe that human beings are made for a purpose and that purpose includes the building of community with its foundation being heterosexual monogamy. There’s nothing wrong with you. Don’t ever let anybody, especially television script writers, make you feel ashamed because of what you believe is true about reality.” Clearly this would imply that those who affirm liberal views on sexuality are wrong. An award winner who made this speech would be denounced as narrow, bigoted, and intolerant. That person could expect never again to work in Hollywood.

Ironically, Ellen’s Emmy speech does the same to those with whom she disagrees. By encouraging people to believe there is nothing wrong with their homosexuality, she is saying there is something wrong with those (i.e., Christians and other social conservatives) who don’t agree with this prescription. This condemnation is evident in the script of the show for which Ellen won an Emmy. In that famous “coming out” episode, the writers presumed that one is either bigoted or ignorant if one thinks Ellen’s homosexuality is deviant and that such a one is incapable of having a thoughtful, carefully wrought case against homosexuality. Such hubris is astounding. It presumes not only that Ellen’s detractors are wrong but also that they are stupid, irrational, and evil and should not even be allowed to make their case. They are, in a word, diseased, suffering from that made-up ailment, “homophobia.”

What a strange way to attack one’s opponents! After all, whether one fears homosexuals is irrelevant to the question of whether homosexual practice is natural, healthy, and moral. No one would say that the arguments of an antiwar protestor should not be taken seriously on the grounds that he is “hemophobic,” that is, fearful of bloodshed. Moreover, if one is homophobic (assuming there is such a thing), that is, suffering from a phobia as one would suffer from claustrophobia, then the homophobe cannot help himself and is therefore suffering from a mental disorder, perhaps one that is the result of his genes. Consequently, calling someone homophobic is tantamount to making fun of the handicapped, unless of course the accuser is himself homophobic.

Ms. DeGeneres has every right to think those who don’t agree with her judgments on human sexuality are wrong. The problem is that she and her more cerebral and sophisticated colleagues present their judgments as if they were not judgments. They believe their views to be in some sense “neutral.” From their perspective they are merely letting people live any way they choose. But this is not neutral at all. It presupposes a particular and controversial view of human nature, human community, and human happiness. It assumes that only three elements, if present, make a sexual practice morally permissible: adult consent, one’s desire, and the lack of intrusion into another person’s lifestyle orientation (i.e., “it doesn’t hurt anybody”).

This, of course, is not obvious. For example, an adult male who receives gratification as a result of pedophile fantasies while secretly viewing his neighbor’s young children, though he never acts on his fantasies and nobody ever finds out, is acting consistently with these three elements. Nevertheless, it seems counterintuitive to say what he is doing is on par with heterosexual monogamy and ought to be treated as such. By what principle can the Ellenites exclude this gentleman from the “tolerance” they accord more chic sexual orientations? At the end of the day, Ellen’s viewpoint is one that affirms what its proponents believe is good, true, and beautiful, while implying that those who dispute this viewpoint are incorrect. Ellen is as intolerant and narrow as her detractors.

In the words of Lieutenant Columbo, the proponent of liberal tolerance is pulling a fast one. She eschews reason, objective morality, and exclusivity, while at the same time proposing that liberal tolerance is the most high-minded, righteous, and philosophically correct perspective that any reflective person with a university education can possibly embrace. Even the most sophisticated defenders of this viewpoint, whether intentionally or not, cannot seem to avoid this philosophical faux pas.

A MORE SOPHISTICATED DEFENSE

Consider the work of social scientists Jung Min Choi and John W. Murphy. They argue that although there are no objective universal norms of knowledge and morality, there are interpretive communities (i.e., cultures, civilizations, nations, ethnic heritages, etc.) within which objective norms are valid. Choi and Murphy explain: "Each community, accordingly, values certain norms. Therefore, some norms may be irrelevant in a specific community, because behavior is not random but is guided by expectations that are known by every competent member of a region. Exhibiting just any behavior would certainly result in a negative sanction. Within an interpretive community the idea that anything goes [i.e., relativism] is simply ridiculous, for all norms do not have equal validity."³

Supporters of this view deny it is relativistic because, they argue, it affirms that each community has its own "absolute" norms of knowledge and morality, though these norms do not apply to other communities. For example, if I live in community X and my community believes it is morally permissible to torture babies for fun and you live in community Y, which maintains that it is morally wrong to torture babies for fun, according to Choi and Murphy, there are no moral norms that transcend communities X and Y by which we can say that Y's opposition to torturing babies is better than X's acceptance of torturing babies.

Perhaps another example will help clarify this view. Suppose that the people in community X believe that the best method of making major medical decisions in life is consulting the zodiac and/or a Ouija Board. So, for example, if Dr. Jones recommends an appendectomy for Mr. Smith but the Ouija Board says no, then it would be best for Mr. Smith not to undergo the appendectomy. Now, the people in community Y used to believe the same thing as the people in X, but they have discovered through numerous double-blind experiments that consulting the zodiac and/or Ouija Board was no better than guessing, flipping a coin, or just plain luck. The people in Y rely on the science behind their medicine as a major part of their decision-making and for that reason have far fewer number of dead patients than community X.

If Choi and Murphy are correct that norms of knowledge are community-relative, then there is no basis for asserting that community Y's view of medical knowledge and decision-making is better than the view held by community X. Yet, it is clear that Y's perspective is more true, and for that reason results in a larger body of life-saving knowledge than X's perspective.

Even though they may deny it, the position defended by Choi and Murphy, and those who agree with their perspective, *is* relativism. It denies that there are universal norms of knowledge and morality that transcend diverse cultures and communities.

When Choi and Murphy attempt to marshal a philosophical defense of their viewpoint, their position unravels, for they are unable to defend their position without relying on the very notions they deny. For example, Choi and Murphy, after arguing for the concept of interpretive communities, go on to defend the work of literary scholar Stanley Fish, by arguing that

sociologists of various hues have *verified a long time ago* what Fish is saying. Symbolic interactionists, for example, have illustrated that *persons* evaluate their actions with regard to their respective "reference groups." Therefore, in terms of a single city, very different pockets of norms may be operative. To understand what deviance means in each circumstance, *a priori definitions of normativeness must be set aside*. For *norms are embedded in symbols, signs, and gestures that may be very unique and restricted to a specific locale*.

Upon crossing one of these relatively invisible boundaries, an individual quickly learns which behaviors are acceptable. This diversity, moreover, has not resulted in the disaster that conservatives predict. Yet navigating through this montage of norms *requires interpretive skill, tolerance, and an appreciation for pluralism*. (94, emphases added)

We learn from this quote that such sociologists *verify* the perspective that knowledge and morality are bound by interpretative communities. Apparently sociologists, at least the sociologists who verify this perspective, are not restricted by *their* interpretive communities. To claim that sociologists verify this perspective as true is to say that they *have knowledge* about reality. According to Choi and Murphy, however, this is impossible, for we are all (including sociologists) restricted by our interpretive communities. In other words, if these sociologists are restricted by their interpretive communities, and thus can give us no objective knowledge of reality, how can Choi and Murphy claim that their viewpoint has been “verified”? It seems, therefore, that Choi and Murphy must ironically presuppose that one can have knowledge of the real world in order to verify the perspective that one cannot have knowledge of the real world. But if their perspective is the correct one, the norms and observations put forth by these sociologists as well as Choi and Murphy cannot be true claims about the world. Thus, the appeal to sociologists who “verify” this view presupposes that the view itself is false!

In addition, Choi and Murphy presuppose certain objective moral norms when they maintain that interpretive skill, tolerance, and appreciation for pluralism are virtues by which one navigates “through this montage of norms,” for this view is offering objective moral guidelines that apparently transcend any particular interpretive community. Put differently, Choi and Murphy are requiring that *all* people, regardless of what interpretive community in which they may reside, abide by certain universal objective moral norms. Yet, if this is not what they mean, then these virtues do not have to be followed by the members of some interpretive communities that don’t accept these norms (e.g., Nazi Germany, a skin-head commune, or a group of sociopaths). Of course, it is absurd for any moral theory not to account for the objective wrong of Nazism, neo-Nazism, or the callous disregard for others.

Liberal Tolerance and the 2000 Southern Baptist Convention

In addition to what we have covered thus far, there are other ways by which we may defend the Christian worldview in a culture that celebrates liberal tolerance. Consider the recent controversy over the plans of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) to evangelize Jews, Muslims, and Hindus in the summer of 2000 in conjunction with its meeting in Chicago. SBC plans to bring 100,000 missionaries for the task. But this does not sit well with religious leaders who embrace liberal tolerance. According to a 28 November 1999 story in the *Chicago Tribune*, “The Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago, representing the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago and 39 other major Christian and Jewish institutions, sent a letter Saturday [27 Nov. 1999] warning that the high-profile evangelical blitz proposed by the Southern Baptists in June would poison interfaith relations and indirectly contribute to violence.”⁴

The letter states that “while we are confident that your volunteers would come with entirely peaceful intentions, a campaign of the nature and scope you envision could contribute to a climate conducive to hate crimes.”⁵ Although the letter acknowledges the Baptists’ constitutional right to religious expression, “it cites last July’s [1999] shooting of six Jews in West Rogers Park and vandalism of a mosque in Villa Park in May as evidence of the vulnerability of people targeted because of their faith.”⁶ It is interesting to note that the Council did not tease out its own logic and conclude that perhaps its call for Southern Baptist self-censorship while connecting a time-honored Christian practice (i.e., evangelism) to vandalism and battery could itself “contribute to a climate conducive to hate crimes” and result in the Baptists themselves being victims.

In any event, how should we as Christians respond to such hysterical and outrageous assessments of our Christian practice? First, the Council is not claiming that Christian doctrine is false, but rather, it is claiming that religious beliefs are not legitimate claims to knowledge at all. So it is not that the Southern Baptists are mistaken about the truth of Christianity; they are mistaken about the nature of religion. For if the Council truly believed that religious doctrines, and Christian truth claims in particular, are claims to real knowledge, they would not have relied on demagoguery and scare tactics to make their point. In other words, the Southern Baptists are dangerous not because Christianity is false and they believe it is

true, but because they really believe that Christianity is true and they believe other people from contrary religious traditions should become Christians as well. This, for the proponent of liberal tolerance, is absurd, because, as we have seen, liberal tolerance is grounded in *relativism* — the view that no one point of view on moral and religious knowledge is objectively correct for every person in every time and in every place.

This is why Bishop C. Joseph Sprague (of United Methodist Church's Northern Illinois Conference) can say of the Southern Baptists' plans for evangelism in Chicago: "I'm always fearful when we in the Christian community move beyond the rightful claim that Jesus is decisive for us, to the presupposition that non-Christians...are outside God's plan of salvation. That smacks of a kind of non-Jesus-like arrogance."⁷ Of course, if Jesus' disciples had followed the Bishop's advice rather than their Lord's Great Commission, there would have been no Christianity as we know it today, if at all, and hence no Methodist bishops calling for the revocation of the Great Commission.

Second, the Council's letter is itself a form of evangelism for the gospel of liberal tolerance, for it is suggesting that the Southern Baptists, the letter's target, abandon their religious tradition and embrace the Council's relativist view of religious truth. If the Southern Baptists don't follow this suggestion, then there will be a type of punishment (i.e., "a campaign of the nature and scope you envision could contribute to a climate conducive to hate crimes"). Like most calls for openness and sensitivity by proponents of liberal tolerance, the Council's letter in reality calls for neither. It requires its recipient either to behave and think in accordance with what the Council believes is the only appropriate way for religious believers to behave and think or to be prepared to face opposition. This opposition may include everything from uncharitable judgments (e.g., "non-Jesus-like arrogance") to threats of violence (e.g., "could contribute to a climate conducive to hate crimes") to far-fetched McCarthyesque guilt by association accusations (e.g., "last July's [1999] shooting of six Jews in West Rogers Park and vandalism of a mosque in Villa Park in May [cited] as evidence of the vulnerability of people targeted because of their faith").

The *Tribune* article states that the timing of the Council letter "throws Chicago into the center of a debate already raging in other parts of the nation."⁸ A couple of examples are cited: "In New York, a Jewish coalition protested a Southern Baptist campaign to pray for the conversion of Jews during the Jewish High Holidays in September. A similar campaign Nov. 7 targeted Hindus on their holiday, Diwali, triggered protests not only across India but also outside a Southern Baptist church in Boston."⁹

These examples are instructive because they show the incoherence of liberal tolerance. In neither case were the Southern Baptists interfering with, or calling for the state or any other agency or group to interfere with, the worship or religious practice of the Jews and Hindus, for whose conversion they were praying. In fact, the Southern Baptists were exhibiting true tolerance. They showed respect for the religious freedom of those who did not share their faith, while at the same time praying for them to come to a belief in what the Southern Baptists believe is the truth. On the other hand, both the Jews and the Hindus tried to exert public pressure on the Southern Baptists through protest so that they would cease to engage in fundamental practices of their Christian faith, that is, prayer and evangelism. If anything, the Jews and Hindus showed less tolerance than the Southern Baptists, whom they sought to silence.

I do not doubt that some Hindus and Jews fail to appreciate and understand why Southern Baptists would choose their holidays to pray for their conversion, and that they find this practice offensive. But do these Hindus and Jews understand and appreciate that, because evangelism is a central aspect of the practice of Christian faith, when they tell Christians not to pray for them the Christians are equally offended?

Just as the Southern Baptists hope that non-Christians are converted to what Christians believe is true about God and religion, proponents of liberal tolerance hope that the Southern Baptists are converted to what proponents of liberal tolerance believe is true about God and religion, namely, relativism. Both

groups are committed to a creed they will not compromise, though only the Southern Baptists seem thoughtful enough to understand this. The liberally tolerant are not as insightful, for they do not see their dogmas as dogmas. For that reason, in the name of liberty and tolerance they will likely continue to use their social and political power to punish Christians and others who will not submit to their doctrines.

THE SHAM OF LIBERAL TOLERANCE

Liberal tolerance is a sham. Although portrayed by its advocates as an open, tolerant, and neutral perspective, it is a dogma whose proponents tolerate no rivals. Those of us who are concerned with presenting and defending our faith in a post-Christian culture must be aware of this sort of challenge, one that masquerades as open, tolerant, and liberating, but in reality is dogmatic, partisan, and coercive.

Although the Christian worldview is marginalized in our culture and considered dangerous by some, we cannot lose our confidence. After all, this is God's universe, and He has made human beings in His image. We must be confident that when we unpack these undeniable notions that are "written on our hearts," those who unreflectively and unthinkingly dismiss our case really do know the truth as well (Rom. 2:15). But this must be balanced with the knowledge that the human heart is incredibly wicked (Jer. 17:9). This tension will remain as long as we attempt to defend our faith in a culture hostile to the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus of Nazareth.

NOTES

1. Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 25.
2. This dialogue originally appeared in Francis J. Beckwith and Gregory Koukl, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 74.
3. Jung Min Choi and John W. Murphy, *The Politics and Philosophy of Political Correctness* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992), 93–94. The remaining citations of this book will appear in the text.
4. Steve Kloehn, "Clergy Ask Baptists to Rethink Area Blitz," *The Chicago Tribune*, 28 November 1999, at www.chicagotribune.com/news/metro/chicago/article/0,2669,ART-38638,FF.html (28 November 1999).
5. Council letter as quoted in *ibid.*
6. Kloehn.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*