



ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”



Occasional Essays
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American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life’s urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today’s Christian students to become tomorrow’s Christian leaders.

—[Kevin T. Bauder](#)

“...Be instant in season,
out of season;
reprove, rebuke, exhort
with all longsuffering
and doctrine.”

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June 2, 2006

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The Use and Abuse of Tolerance

Kevin T. Bauder

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Tolerance has become a shibboleth in contemporary American society. We are constantly harangued to exhibit tolerance toward all manner of differences. Nothing is less stylish than to assert some belief as absolute, except perhaps to treat that absolute as the basis of a moral judgment. To be sure of one’s moral base—and to censure someone else’s conduct as immoral—is to be judged guilty of hate and phobia.

Of course, this pretense of tolerance is the merest hypocrisy. Nobody is willing to tolerate absolutely every idea and every activity. Those who prattle most about tolerance have also become the most notorious for imposing draconian speech and conduct codes. It turns out that speech Nazis *do* believe in absolutes, and they are willing to enforce their absolutes in obviously coercive ways.

The truth is that unbounded tolerance is neither possible nor desirable. Nobody—absolutely nobody—believes that tolerance can exist without limitation. Sooner or later, everyone bumps up against something intolerable and hateful. Pedophilia, genocide, gang rape, torturing children: something is wrong with a person who cannot hate these acts. Only a moral nitwit would want to tolerate them.

The question is not *whether* we ought to be intolerant, but *when*. How do we know what should be tolerated and what should not? Several observations help to answer this question, but one in particular is the subject of the present discussion.

That observation is that tolerance is not the same as agreement. One need not necessarily support or agree with everything that one tolerates. Contrapositively, disagreement does not necessarily constitute intolerance.

Tolerance does not entail support. It does not imply acceptance or concurrence. It does not implicate one in the tolerated activity. Tolerance merely requires forbearance. It is the refusal to bring coercive measures against ideas or practices with which one disagrees. It is the rejection of force.

To tolerate means to *allow*, not to *agree*. Indeed, when people agree, tolerance is not being exercised, for when people agree they have nothing to tolerate. People are tolerant exactly when they choose to allow, or not to oppose by force, the expression of an idea that they think is mistaken, or the performance of an act that they think is wrong.

If tolerance does not require agreement, then expressing disagreement does not constitute intolerance. Agreement is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of tolerance. Tolerance does not assume any level of acceptance or affirmation. In fact, the insistence upon agreement, acceptance, or affirmation is essentially intolerant.

The redefinition of tolerance to include acceptance, agreement, approval, and affirmation is a symptom of contemporary relativism. It is the residue of the notion that we cannot know truth, but that each person has a “truth” that works for himself. Under this version of relativism, people are permitted to hold their own beliefs and standards only as long as they do not declare other people’s thinking and conduct to be wrong.

The relativistic version of tolerance has become the default position within contemporary society. This fact poses great challenges for Christians. It has even led some Christians to alter the presentation of their faith. Misapplying Paul’s teachings and example, and often overawed by the spirit of the age, they have attempted to refashion the presentation of Christianity along lines that would be acceptable to contemporary relativists. To these Christians I wish to address three remarks.

First, the prominence of relativistic tolerance is not primarily the result of philosophical enquiry or reasonable demonstration. It is primarily the result of ignorance and laziness. Except for a handful of genuine thinkers, people default to this view because they lack either the mental equipment or the moral initiative to think about hard questions. Their primary motivation in life is to gratify their appetites, and the clichéd versions of populist relativism give them precisely the excuse they want. When they are challenged with absolutes, they invariably react angrily. Their angry reaction does not come from a wish to defend a high ideal: what occupies their minds can hardly be called an ideal, and it certainly is not high. No, their anger stems from the fact that they are thwarted in the indulgence of their appetites. They become aware of a nagging sense that their lives are profoundly shallow, their ignorance is culpable, and they will some day be called to account for their actions. All of this is part of what Christians call “the conviction of sin,” which necessarily precedes any effective presentation of the gospel.

Second, contemporary relativism is one of the least tolerant philosophies that has ever been contrived. While it prides itself on its tolerance, it is only willing to tolerate other forms of relativism. Any position that claims to speak in the name of absolutes will be refused a voice. Not only that, if absolutists are bold enough to refute ideas or rebuke conduct in the name of the transcendent, they will eventually be subjected to coercive measures. Relativists will *not* agree with, accept, affirm, or approve of any absolutist position. Quite the contrary, they will find forcible ways to block the expression of absolutist views. Herein lies the hypocrisy of relativism: under the name of tolerance, it tolerates only itself. The (absolutist) positions that really disagree with it are suppressed, either overtly or covertly.

Third, Christians cannot afford to accommodate themselves to contemporary relativism. Neither can they afford to ignore it. A Christianity that loses its ability to rebuke falsehood and sin is no longer Christianity at all. True, Christians can often achieve greater visible success if only they are willing to suppress some part of the faith. To make this accommodation, however, results in more and more people converting to less and less Christianity. At the end of the day, no Christianity will be left. Accommodating their faith to relativistic attitudes is one of the most self-destructive things that Christians can do.

Christianity is a religion of absolutes. It cannot be mixed with any form of relativism, and it cannot be accurately expressed in relativistic categories. Of course, Christians should not be rude or brutal in the presentation of their convictions. Their expressions of faith and conviction must be civil, reasonable, and even meek. Nevertheless, the unpopularity of absolutes in general, and the greater unpopularity of Christian absolutes in particular, should never restrain from affirming either the necessity of absolutes or the truth of Christian absolutes.

When we defend absolutes, we are not merely engaging in intellectual debate. We are conducting spiritual warfare. We are rejecting and even attacking the Great Idol of our day. We are following Paul’s example when he speaks of “Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. . . .” We must not be surprised if the idolaters become angry. Idolaters try to protect their idols. That will never change.

The mechanisms of intolerance are manifold. What they all have in common is that they resort to coercion rather than persuasion. The Taliban was intolerant when it dynamited ancient Buddhist statues. Al Qaeda was intolerant when it crashed airliners into the World Trade Center. Soulforce “Equality” riders were intolerant when they blockaded doors on the campus of North Central University. Operation Rescue was intolerant when it barred access to abortion clinics. Employers are intolerant when they fire workers for sexual harassment. Bible colleges are intolerant when they expel students for using pornography. Southern Baptist leaders were intolerant when they dismissed “moderate” professors from the convention seminaries. Harvard is intolerant of shabby scholarship. Mayo Clinic is intolerant of malpractice.

Evidently, intolerance is everywhere. Some of it is legitimate; some of it is not. How is a person to tell the difference? The first part of the answer is that genuine tolerance does not require agreement, and disagreement does not constitute intolerance. X



A Prayer to the Father of Heaven

John Skelton (ca. 1460-1529)

O radiant luminary of light interminable,
Celestial Father, potential God of might,
Of heaven and earth O Lord incomparable,
Of all perfections the essential most perfite !
O maker of mankind, that formèd day and night,
Whose power imperial comprehendeth every place :
Mine heart, my mind, my thought, my whole delight
Is after this life to see thy glorious face.

Whose magnificense is incomprehensible,
All arguments of reason which far doth exceed,
Whose deity doubtless is indivisible,
From whom all goodness and virtue doth proceed ;
Of thy support all créatures have need :
Assist me, good Lord, and grant me of thy grace
To live to thy pleasure in word, thought, and deed,
And after this life to see thy glorious face. X



Hieronymus Bosch. *The Cure of Folly*. 1475-1480.



ΤΟΥΤΟ ΦΡΟΝΕΙΤΕ ΕΝ ΥΜΙΝ

