



ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”



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—[Kevin T. Bauder](#)

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

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Tolerating Ideas Versus Tolerating Conduct

Kevin T. Bauder

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Tolerance means to allow the expression of ideas or the performance of acts with which one disagrees. It does not necessarily imply any measure of agreement or affirmation. On the contrary, where complete agreement exists, tolerance is neither necessary nor possible. Tolerance is essentially a form of abstinence. Tolerant people abstain from bringing force or other coercion to bear against ideas or conduct that they find offensive.

Without some level of tolerance, all human society would rapidly disintegrate. No two persons agree about every idea or all conduct. Consequently, complete intolerance would pit each person in warfare against all others. This state of affairs is anarchy, and the only way of avoiding it is through tolerance. Therefore, some level of tolerance is a necessary virtue.

But so is some level of intolerance. Absolutely nobody believes that every idea or act can be tolerated. When we fly on an airliner, we do not want engineers who tolerate mathematical mistakes. When we are in the hospital, we do not want an administration that tolerates malpractice. When we are walking down the street, we do not want police officers who tolerate murder and mayhem. Under these circumstances, tolerance is not a virtue. It is an evil.

Sometimes tolerance is a virtue. Sometimes it is an evil. How do we know which is which?

We have already seen one part of the answer to this question. Tolerance does not require agreement. Therefore, disagreement by itself never constitutes intolerance. If we believe in the free exchange of ideas, then we must believe in the free exchange of disagreement. To express disagreement is, in itself, no violation of tolerance.

A second part of the answer lies in the distinction between ideas and conduct. Ideas usually imply actions, and actions are often the implementation of ideas. Yet even the most tolerant societies find that bad ideas are more tolerable than bad conduct.

Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* advocated the idea of genocide. When Hitler came into power, he turned that idea into action. We cannot hear names like Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Spandau, or Treblinka without being reminded of the Holocaust.

Both the idea and the actions are deeply immoral. In the West, another Holocaust would not (or at least should not) be tolerated. One is more than enough. Yet, *mutatis mutandis*, who would want to live in a civilization in which it was illegal to read a copy of *Mein Kampf*?

We can tolerate the advocacy of certain ideas, even when we would forcibly oppose their actual implementation. It is one thing to argue that anarchy is superior to democracy, but quite another to attempt to overthrow a democratically elected government. Tolerating books (such as Plato’s *Symposium*) that excuse pederasty is one thing; tolerating child molesters is a different thing altogether. In at least some cases, the standard for tolerating ideas ought to be looser than the standard for tolerating the corresponding actions.

The reverse is also true. Where they have legitimate authority, people ought to be ready to stop some actions by force, even if the corresponding ideas are tolerated. If someone advocates the demolition of all theaters (not a bad idea, actually), we may smile indulgently. If that same person drives a bulldozer through a theater wall, however, then indulgence is at an end. The police must intervene.

The algorithm seems simple enough: expression of ideas, more tolerance; commission of deeds, less tolerance. This apparent simplicity becomes more complicated, however, when we recognize two factors. These are factors that we meet every day.

The first complication is that conduct has come to be understood as a mode of expression. Burning a nation’s flag is thought of as a matter of free speech. Similarly, pornography can be protected as part of the free exchange of ideas. The decision to tolerate these expressions has been very controversial—and for good reason. Some forms of expression go beyond advocacy of an idea. They actually implicate people in the conduct that they advocate.

Someone who wears a white hood and burns a cross is doing more than advocating racism. That person is actually participating in a racist act. Likewise, the burning of a nation’s flag is more than an expression of disdain for the nation. It can be construed as an actual attack upon the nation itself. Certainly, most people who produce and view pornography are expressing an opinion about human sexuality, but they are also engaging in a sexual activity.

At some point, the consequences of involvement in the activity have to outweigh the toleration for expressing the idea. In the nature of the case, every murder and every rape is a statement about how the perpetrator perceives the victim, but freedom of expression does not guarantee the right to commit murders and rapes. Riots and mutinies are certainly statements of ideas, but civil societies should not tolerate them.

The second complication is that expression can turn into incitement, even when it does not involve actual participation. Expression and incitement are not equivalent acts. Expressing the opinion that all theaters ought to be demolished is one thing. Urging someone actually to fire up the bulldozer is something quite different. Incitement to action is much more like committing the act than it is like merely expressing an opinion, and the laws of most countries recognize this fact.

The distinction between expression and incitement is one reason that Nazi expressions are not tolerated in Germany. German society is remarkably tolerant about the expression of most any idea, but Nazi symbols and memorabilia are banned. Given recent history, it is not possible to advocate Nazi ideas in Germany *without* (intentionally or unintentionally) verging on incitement. Germans are right not to tolerate these expressions.

In spite of these complications, the main point stands: any society is likely to be able to tolerate more by way of ideas than it can by way of conduct. Of course, acknowledging this fact still does not define which ideas (or practices) should be tolerated. What it does do is to let us know that we will be looking for two sets of standards: one set for ideas, but a different set for conduct. X



Long Barren Christina Rossetti (1830-1894)

THOU who didst hang upon a barren tree,
My God, for me ;
 Though I till now be barren, now at length
 Lord, give me strength
To bring forth fruit to Thee.

Thou who didst bear for me the crown of thorn,
Spitting and scorn ;
 Though I till now have put forth thorns, yet now
 Strengthen me Thou
That better fruit be borne.

Thou Rose of Sharon, Cedar of broad roots
Vine of sweet fruits,
 Thou Lily of the vale with fadeless leaf,
 Of thousands Chief,
Feed Thou my feeble shoots. X



Albrecht Durer. *The Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand*. 1508.



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