

# ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

## “In the Nick of Time”

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Occasional Essays  
and Other Stuff  
for Christian  
Students

Presented by the  
President of

Central Baptist  
Theological  
Seminary of  
Minneapolis

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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July 21, 2006

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## Tolerance and Self-Preservation

Kevin T. Bauder

Every society, voluntary or not, must achieve some balance between tolerance and intolerance. Without this balance a society either sinks into tyranny or spins into anarchy. In order to preserve itself every society must find the requisite combination of a tolerance and intolerance.

For voluntary societies, this balance is essentially a matter of articulating a reason for being. At the point of its purpose, a voluntary society cannot tolerate divergence. A different purpose necessarily creates a different society.

Involuntary societies such as civil orders do not exist for the same purpose as voluntary societies. The main purpose of a civil society is to preserve order by providing protection against enemies outside and miscreants inside the society. Other functions may be assumed over time, but if this basic purpose is not fulfilled, the involuntary society will soon unravel or be overthrown.

The function of a civil society, and more particularly, a government, is to maintain order. Yet we have already seen that civil societies, in order to be just, must grant the maximum allowable degree of tolerance. Order must not be maintained at the expense of oppressing a people.

Setting the boundary between order and oppression is exactly the same problem as establishing the balance between tolerance and intolerance. One tempting solution to this problem is simply to tolerate what is right and to prohibit what is wrong. Some Christians favor this

solution and seek to incorporate biblical morality as the law of the land. The Bible itself, however, nowhere authorizes Christians to impose its morality upon their civilizations. At least some wrong ideas and activities ought to be tolerated within civil societies.

Appealing to right and wrong is one way to try to balance tolerance with intolerance. Another way is to attack whatever appears to threaten the society. In this approach, no unsettling ideas or activities can be tolerated.

In its most basic form, this sort of intolerance is almost instinctive. Like many individual people, many societies spontaneously close themselves off from the disquieting and even the unfamiliar. This kind of intolerance may appear to be simple xenophobia, but it is actually grounded in something far deeper.

Even an involuntary society must share some ethos if it is to survive. It must hold some common sense of value that defines what is important and what is acceptable. This sense of value must be grounded in a shared understanding of what the world is and how it is put together. Furthermore, it must appeal to a vision of the transcendent so that these values are more than a matter of mere convenience. This worldview must be shared by enough members of the society to create a widespread inclination toward conformity. Otherwise, the enforcement of civil standards becomes a matter of mere, brute force and the society devolves into tyranny.

Once this shared worldview—and the moral consensus that it implies—begins to crumble, the society itself begins to unravel. Without these common categories, restraint vanishes and people are governed by appetite. Society dissolves into the assertion of one person's will against another's. If enough people desire the same thing, they can enforce that thing upon the remaining members of the society. Any hope of order, however, vanishes.

Gibbon made the argument that Christianity was responsible for the collapse of the Roman empire, and he was probably right, though not in the sense that he meant it. The institutions of Rome were erected upon the categories of polytheism and a divine emperor. These categories implied a particular moral consensus. As Christianity spread, it challenged these categories and altered this consensus. The institutions of the empire had to be transformed or weakened or both. Any Rome that survived this process had to be radically different from the Rome that preceded it.

The Islamic nations intuitively perceive this dynamic. They know that the institutions of their societies are erected upon Quranic categories. Opening their societies to Christian categories would raise the specter of transformation, and opening their societies to secular categories would produce (from their point of view) almost unimaginable devastation.

Nothing is more natural than for a society to protect its fundamental moral consensus and worldview. Indeed, any society that does not guard this foundation risks either annihilation or else transformation into an entirely different kind of society (which is another kind of annihilation). If the moral consensus is shattered, the institutions of the society will become the prize in a contest between competing worldviews. In the long run, those institutions will almost inevitably collapse. If the moral consensus is transformed, then the institutions will have to be altered correspondingly, or else be replaced by new ones. On any account, the society *as it has been* will cease to exist.

From these observations some might reason that every society *should* establish the boundaries of tolerance in such a way as to protect the moral foundation of the society. The fact is that most societies actually *do* establish their boundaries in exactly this way. From the point of view

of the society, intolerance is always desirable at the point of its fundamental worldview and moral consensus.

The problem is that not every worldview, moral consensus, and society has an equal right to survive. Not every worldview corresponds to reality. Not every moral consensus yields an adequate degree of justice. Not every society is worth perpetuating, at least not untransformed in all its aspects.

The National Socialists took the ashes of the German state, imposed their worldview and ethos, and erected a powerful society. The power of that society, however, came at the cost of intolerance toward Jews, Gypsies, orthodox Protestants, and a variety of other groups that challenged the Nazi worldview and ethos. Though Nazi society was successful, it needed to be challenged.

American society used to tolerate a particularly obnoxious form of slavery. The worldview and ethos of slaveholders allowed for this “peculiar institution,” but a contrary worldview and ethos opposed it. The result was the dismantling of the institution—and it was right for American slavery to be dismantled.

Societies are not hermetically sealed and self-contained. They exist within a universe that is ordered, transcendent, and moral. The fundamental assumptions of the society have a right to remain dominant only as long as they conform to the universe as it is. When they do not, then the society will necessarily become oppressive, brutal, and unjust.

Therefore, self-preservation is not an adequate mechanism for establishing the boundaries of tolerance. Those who bear responsibility for a civil society have a duty to protect it from invasion and from anarchy. They exceed their authority, however, if they attempt to protect it from the truth. An order that has to be maintained at the expense of truth will also be maintained at the expense of justice. Such an order is not worth maintaining as it is.

For this reason, the preservation of an existing order is never a sufficient test to determine the boundaries of tolerance. Some other element must be added, an element that sits in judgment over every order. This element must be transcendent, yet (as we have seen) it must be distinct from the sum of biblical morality. The employment of that element should be the greatest concern of every society. ✘

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

# HOLY SONNETS. I.

John Donne (1572-1631)

THOU hast made me, and shall Thy work decay ?  
Repair me now, for now mine end doth haste ;  
I run to death, and Death meets me as fast,  
And all my pleasures are like yesterday.  
I dare not move my dim eyes any way ;  
Despair behind, and Death before doth cast  
Such terror, and my feeble flesh doth waste  
By sin in it, which it towards hell doth weigh.  
Only Thou art above, and when towards Thee  
By Thy leave I can look, I rise again ;  
But our old subtle foe so tempteth me,  
That not one hour myself I can sustain.  
Thy grace may wing me to prevent his art  
And thou like adamant draw mine iron heart. ✕

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