

Toleration as a Concept: Paradoxical or Practicable?

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze and consider if tolerance, as a concept, is achievable or impractical. While most measures of toleration are done within the realm of political toleration, there are measurable effects of religious commitment and belief systems on the concept of tolerance. The call for absolute tolerance of one concept, religion, or ideology may, in fact, lead to the rejection of another. Absolute tolerance, defined here as the “acceptance of all ideals and ideologies as equally valid,” requires that many religions compromise the very tenets of their belief systems. Therefore, the call for absolute tolerance is not only impractical but paradoxical in nature. However, the call for individual tolerance, maintaining individual autonomy, nurturing diversity, and encouraging integration in a cohesive and harmonious society is not only reasonable but necessary in maintaining true democracy.

Introduction

Since Stouffer's seminal study on political tolerance in 1955, many subsequent studies have set out to measure and predict tolerance among people of faith. The basis of these measures of political tolerance has left little room for varying *degrees* of tolerance within religious groups. The lack of flexibility in the measurement of the General Social Survey (GSS) leaves “absolute tolerance” as the general standard by which religious groups are judged tolerant or intolerant. This is an unfair standard by which to judge religions and people of faith. The call for absolute tolerance of another faith means, to some, the denial of important aspects of one's own faith. To call for absolute tolerance of certain peoples of faith is to display intolerance oneself, is paradoxical in nature, and is impractical in implementation. Individual tolerance of one's neighbor is, however, the duty of people of faith. Therefore, it is individual tolerance that is the practical means by which the concept of tolerance can be achieved.

The necessity for tolerance of diverse political and religious beliefs has been the cornerstone for the founding and sustaining of democracy within the United States and other democratic nations. In 1790 President George Washington wrote a letter of thanks to a Jewish Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island in which he praised the new nation, “which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance” but where all people are given the right to “liberty of conscience” and “enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights.”¹ One might argue that the U.S. has yet to live up to the intention of our founders, yet by definition of the “inherent natural right” to pursue one's own “liberty of conscience” is a constitutionally protected right and freedom of all who live in a free and democratic society.

¹ J. Daryl Charles, "Truth, Tolerance, and Christian Conviction: reflections on a perennial Question - A Review Essay," *Christian Scholar's Review* 36, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 188.

DEFINING TOLERANCE

- “Tolerance is the virtue of the man without convictions.” G. K. Chesterton
- “Tolerance implies no lack of commitment to one's own beliefs. Rather it condemns the oppression or persecution of others.” John F. Kennedy

Traditional Definition

The definition of tolerance is as diverse as humanity itself. To some tolerance is the means by which democracy was built, thrives and will persevere. To others the call for tolerance is the greatest threat to individual autonomy and religious freedom in the postmodern era. The problem is not tolerance as a concept but the manner in which tolerance is defined.

Mondak and Sanders suggest a very strict definition of tolerance as “People are tolerant to the extent that they are willing to grant the full rights of citizenship uniformly and without exception...*people are intolerant provided that they advocate any restriction of political acts that are otherwise permissible by law.*”² Gibson, however, takes issue with such a position of what he calls “absolutist tolerance” deeming this measure to be in error if no consideration is given to the *degree* of tolerance or intolerance of the individual.³ The manner in which one approaches tolerance as a concept then determines if one believes tolerance can or should be achieved.

The definition of tolerance for the purposes of this paper will be defined in two distinct ways: *absolute tolerance*, which follows the Mondak and Sanders model of full acceptance without exception, based upon the study of political tolerance; and *individual tolerance* meaning the total acceptance of an individual while allowing for degrees of tolerance of differing beliefs, faiths, behaviors and acts of the individual.

Political Tolerance

Political tolerance is commonly perceived as the willingness to allow the expression of “unpopular political views”⁴ or extending civil rights to those who are considered outside the political or social norms of society.⁵ This type of tolerance is a complex task that requires much more than a mere feigned acceptance. One must never mistake apathy for tolerance. As Babić

² Jeffery J. Mondak and Mitchell S. Sanders, "Tolerance and Intolerance, 1976-1998," *American Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 3 (July 2003): 496.

³ James L. Gibson, "On the Nature of Tolerance: dichotomous or continuous?," *Political Behavior* 27, no. 4 (December 2005): 319.

⁴ James L. Gibson and Amanda Gouws, "Making Tolerance Judgments: the effects of context, local and national," *The Journal of Politics* 63, no. 4 (November 2001): 1067.

⁵ Vyacheslav Karpov, "Religiosity and Tolerance in the United States and Poland," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 2 (2002): 267.

suggests, "Tolerance presupposes *endurance* of something not only unpleasant but also unacceptable for *us*, while we grant it to *others*."⁶

Political tolerance must also not be mistaken for the lack of prejudice. Based upon the studies of political tolerance one can be prejudice will remaining tolerant based upon the individual's positive response to allowing the expression of ideas of those whom he or she is prejudiced.⁷ One must also be cautious in deeming political dissent or disagreement with political intolerance. Political tolerance must, by definition, support and encourage political diversity.

The measures of political tolerance, as presented here, are also strong measures and predictors of religious tolerance. This leads one to question the notion of tolerance as a political ideal or a moral ideology. If tolerance is seen as a moral ideological issue then it can, in fact, lead to a greater problem of intolerance among people of varying belief systems.⁸

Perceived "New Tolerance"

The ideological approach to tolerance can lead to extremes in the definition of tolerance. While one group may find the concept of toleration as a threat to the tenets of their faith, another group may find it essential to the continuation of a particular belief system. This has led to the perception of a "new tolerance," based upon the model of absolute tolerance, and is the cause of a great ideological divide between fundamentalist and liberal movements.

Fundamentalist View as a Threat to Religious Freedom

In his book, *A Primer to Postmodernism*, Dr. Stanley J. Grenz, the late Professor of Theology at Carey Theological College in Vancouver, British Columbia, defined "new tolerance" as "truth is relative to the community in which a person participates. And since there are many human communities, there are necessarily many different truths."⁹ This, according to Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, is the greatest threat to the autonomy of faith, specifically, the Christian faith. In their book, *The New Tolerance: How a cultural movement threatens to destroy you, your faith, and your children*, the authors submit that:

Tolerance says, "You must agree with me." Love responds, "I must do something harder; I will tell you the truth because I am convinced that 'the truth will set you free.'"

Tolerance says, "You must approve of what I do." Love responds, "I must do something harder; I will love you, even when your behavior offends me."

⁶ Jovan Babić, "Toleration vs. doctrinal evil in our time," *The Journal of Ethics* 8 (2004): 227.

⁷ Corwin Smidt and James M. Penning, "Religious Commitment, Political Conservatism, and Political and Social Tolerance: A longitudinal analysis," *Sociological Analysis* 42, no. 3 (1982): 232.

⁸ Wilhelm Heitmeyer, "A Propos: Tolerance as risk," *Montatshefte* 95, no. 1 (2003): 14-16.

⁹ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer to Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 14.

Tolerance says, “You must allow me to have my way.” Love responds, “I must do something harder; I will plead with you to follow the right way, because I believe you are worth the risk.” Tolerance seeks to be inoffensive; love takes risks.

Tolerance is indifferent; love is active. Tolerance costs nothing; love costs everything.¹⁰

As an individual of faith, one must always consider love in dealing with one another. However, the authors are making the mistake of equating tolerance with apathy or indifference. Pope John Paul II, in his *Veritatis Splendor*, puts this same theme in more political terms saying, “Democracy without values readily turns into open or thinly veiled totalitarianism.”¹¹ Both of these arguments make the same mistake, as Gibson points out, as Mondak and Sanders’ argument in that the position of “love” leaves no room for varying degrees of tolerance or intolerance. This argument boils the concept of tolerance down to an “all or nothing” moral ideology.

Liberal View as Means to Preserve Democracy

Much of the liberal definition of the concept of tolerance vs. intolerance is based upon the first systematic study on political tolerance completed by Stouffer in 1955. This study found the more educated the individual combined with less religious attendance the greater the tolerance level.¹² Yet, Stouffer’s study, based on the GSS 15 point scale, determined tolerance of peoples such as homosexuals, atheist, militarists and communists in a highly contextualized environment of the 1950’s with a strong national religious influence and the “Red Scare” threat of communism.¹³ Therefore, it could be argued that the highly contextualization of this scale may give pause in determining the measure of religious involvement to intolerance.

Religious involvement, being viewed as the more intolerant viewpoint, has led some to suggest that one must accept all viewpoints, belief systems and faiths as equally valid. The nuance of the definition rests in the term “equally valid.” Edwin J. Delattre, dean of Boston U’s School of Ed., defines this term as “the elevation of all values and beliefs to [a position worthy of equal] respect.”¹⁴ Judge Danny Boggs of the US Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, however, defines the term as the “adherents of all faiths deserve equal rights as citizens” and that “all faiths are equally valid as religions.”¹⁵ The interpretation of “equally valid” based upon these definitions can have two connotations: “equally valid” defined as the equal *right* to hold a religious belief system or “equally valid” defined as equal spiritual *truths*. The rejection of the

¹⁰ Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *The New Tolerance: How a cultural movement threatens to destroy you, your faith, and your children* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1998), 95.

¹¹ Charles, 200.

¹² Smidt and Penning, 232.

¹³ Gibson Gouws, 1068.

¹⁴ Edwin J. Delattre, "Diversity, Ethics, and Education in America," *Ethics: Easier Said than Done* 4, no. 5: 49.

¹⁵ Stephen Bates, "Religious Diversity and the Schools," *The American Enterprise* 4, no. 5 (Sept/Oct 1993): 18.

definition of “equally valid” as a civil right is a rejection of the basic foundation of democracy. However, the acceptance of other religions as “equally valid” (or equally true) can lead to the rejection of one’s personal standard of faith. Therefore, the measurements of intolerance based upon “absolute tolerance” create a chasm between the fundamentalist and liberal view of tolerance and leave both sides at an impasse.

The Definitional Dilemma

The problem, as laid out above, is the definitional assumptions made by each side of the ideological debate of tolerance as a concept. Both make strong arguments for a need to prevent one ideology from overriding the other. Herein lays the paradox of tolerance. To get over this paradox is to achieve definitional clarity. Asani suggests that the inability to join together in mutual tolerance of faith and ideology “is not so much a clash of civilizations as it is a clash of ignorances.”¹⁶ The ignorance is betrayed in the extremes on each side with little to no room for degrees of intolerance or genuine dissent and disagreement. Both sides have valid points in that tolerance should not require that one abandon personal faith as truth neither should it require all belief systems to adhere to one particular standard of religious truth. Therefore, until a definitional consensus is reached true tolerance of both ideals and ideologies may continue to be elusive.

Tolerance Measures Among The Religious In America

The GSS is not a perfect measure of tolerance yet the results over the past half century cannot be ignored. Studies have shown that levels of tolerance rose sharply in the twenty years preceding Stouffer’s original study but leveled out in the last half of the twentieth century presenting little to no increase in tolerance between the years of 1976-1998.¹⁷ These studies continue to show a correlation between religious conviction and tolerance levels.

The greatest predictor of intolerance is the level of theological conservatism of the individual. The most significant factor is the belief in Biblical literalism and the view of God as a wrathful punisher of sinners. One’s exposure and acceptance of religious doctrines decreases tolerance of non-traditional behaviors more than the amount of time spent with individuals with like-minded beliefs. A measure which combined “born-again” experience and Biblical literalism is a stronger predictor of intolerance than fundamentalism or evangelicalism.¹⁸ Karpov’s study in the US and Poland shows that religious commitment and participation has very little influence on political tolerance. However, theocratic orientation is found to have a direct influence on all

¹⁶ Ali S. Asani, “So That You May Know One Another”: A Muslim American reflects on pluralism and Islam,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 588 (July 2003): 42.

¹⁷ Mondak and Sanders, 492.

¹⁸ Paul Froese, Christopher Bader and Buster Smith, “Political Tolerance and God’s Wrath in the United States,” *Sociology of Religion* 69, no. 1 (2008): 32.

aspects of tolerance. The stronger the theocratic orientation of the individual indicated a higher level of social conservatism which led to a greater level of intolerance.¹⁹

Despite these studies, the changes in the denominational groups have a significant impact on intolerance. Some recent studies show that conservative Protestants are becoming more tolerant over time.²⁰ This new diversity in evangelical religious groups illustrates the need for caution regarding previous studies of intolerance among evangelicals. In fact, Evangelical “preoccupation with ideological absolutism and rejection of diversity” is weaker than projected or expected.²¹ The implication of the GSS’s strict tolerance measurements of religious individuals grows even more complex among political liberals. The higher the level of religious commitment, among those self-identifying as politically liberal, results in a higher level of political tolerance.

With such varying definitions and levels of tolerance it seems that the issue may be at a paradoxical standoff. One pictures a scene from the Wild West as two gunfighters face each other in a duel to the death. Yet, both seem to be fighting an imaginary enemy based upon poor definitions and lack of communication. Both fundamentalists and liberals must come to a practical consensus on the concept of tolerance that does not suppress the ideals or ideology of the individual. Without individual tolerance true democracy cannot be sustained and religious duty cannot be fulfilled.

The Call For Individual Tolerance

In Judaism, Christianity and Islam there is a call not only for the tolerance of others but to love one another. Without love, the religious duty of the individual is not met. This love, as expressed in the respective religious books is one of individual acceptance and peace. It does not call for full integration of all belief systems but for understanding and acceptance of the individual.

The Torah directs, “Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart; thou shalt surely rebuke thy neighbour, and not bear sin because of him. Thou shalt not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”²² In the Gospels of Mark and Matthew Christ reiterates this message of the Torah as one of the greatest commandments, second only to loving God himself.²³ In his letter to the Romans the Apostle Paul expounds upon this commandment by saying, “Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, ‘*You shall not commit adultery,*’ ‘*You shall not murder,*’ ‘*You shall not steal,*’ ‘*You shall not bear false witness,*’ ‘*You shall not covet,*’ and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this

¹⁹ Karpov, 284.

²⁰ Froese, Bader and Smith, 31-32.

²¹ David A. Gay and Christopher G. Ellison, “Religious Subcultures and Political Tolerance: Do denominations still matter?,” *Review of Religious Research* 34, no. 4 (June 1993): 326.

²² See Leviticus 19:17-18.

²³ See Mark 12:31 and Matthew 22:39.

saying, namely, ‘*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*’ Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”²⁴

The Quran is not silent on the subject of tolerance and unity as well. It states, “O humankind, We [God] have created you male and female, and made you into communities and tribes, so that you may know one another.”²⁵ Islamic scholar Ali Asani teaches of this passage that “from the perspective of the Quran, the divine purpose underlying the creation of human diversity is to foster knowledge and understanding, to promote harmony and cooperation among peoples.”²⁶ In continuation of the idea of unity the Quran calls Jews, Christians and Muslims “The People of the Book” and instructs, “And argue not with the People of the Book unless it be in a way that is better, save with such of them as do wrong; and say we believe in that which has been revealed to us and to you; and our God and your God is one and unto Him we submit.”²⁷ In recent years there has been an attempt to expand the term to include Hindu, Buddhists and others in the term “The People of the Book.”²⁸

There is room for internal debate within these religions as to the levels of tolerance which is acceptable to their systems of faith, yet there can be no question as to the duty of the peoples of faith to unity in love among neighbors. When Christ was asked by a young lawyer, “Who is my neighbor?” he responded with the famous parable of the Good Samaritan. This good man who helped the Palestinian Jew whom he knew, by custom, thought very lowly of him. Yet, he picked him up from the side of the road, bandaged him, and paid for his keeping until he had healed. The question is posed today, “Who is my neighbor?” and the answer is the same as it was in Jesus’ day, “the one who had mercy.”²⁹ The practical implementation of true tolerance then is to be merciful in demonstrating individual tolerance to one’s neighbor.

The Objectives of Individual Tolerance

Individual tolerance should not be seen as total acceptance of principles, values, and beliefs systems as “equally true” but rather gives the freedom of dissent. There are three objectives in the call for individual tolerance; to promote individual autonomy, to nurture the acceptance of diversity, and integration within a diverse yet cohesive and harmonious society.³⁰ The keys to reaching these objectives by peoples of faith can be found in Andrew Wright’s Critical Realist point of view, which does not accept what he calls the postmodern “rudderless... game of personal reality creation.”³¹ Instead, it recognizes that “truth claiming is an inevitable

²⁴ Romans 13:8-10 (NIV).

²⁵ See Quran 49:13.

²⁶ Asani, 43.

²⁷ See Quran 29:46.

²⁸ Asani, 44.

²⁹ See Luke 10:29-37.

³⁰ Tim Pearson, "Balancing Tolerance, Autonomy and a Framework for Social Cohesion," *Journal of Education & Christian Belief* 7, no. 2 (2003): 113.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

prerequisite of rationality.”³² One will never be able to escape claims of truth in matters of science or faith. Yet, there are riches to be found in traditions of truth claims. Even the Apostle Paul found truths within other cultures in which he established common ground with individuals of other faiths.³³ Accepting an epistemological understanding is crucial to individual tolerance while retaining respect of one’s individual autonomy.

Conclusion

The expectation of absolute tolerance of people of faith, as measured by the GSS, is not only paradoxical but infringes on the intrinsic values of various faiths. Babić explains this paradox as “An ideology explicitly and crucially constructed in terms of a specific understanding of toleration, therefore, is seen to generate intolerance on another level.”³⁴ One must view tolerance as individualistic rather than absolute. Religious intolerance when it is absolute will lead to the stunting of political democracy. Yet a call for absolute tolerance can lead to the stifling of individual autonomy and freedom of expression. “True tolerance grants people the right to dissent.”³⁵

Is there an answer then to individual tolerance that leads to a practical and widespread implementation of tolerance? Author C.S. Lewis presented his thoughts on the matter:

Well, let’s go on disagreeing but don’t let us *judge*. What doesn’t suit us may suit possible converts of a different type. My model here is the ‘Russian Orthodox’ service, where some sit, some lie on their faces, some stand, some kneel, some walk about, and *no one takes the slightest notice of what anyone else is doing*. That is good sense, good manners, and good Christianity. “Mind one’s own business” is a good rule in religion as in other things.³⁶

Lewis’ tongue-in-cheek conclusion should, in no way, diminish his message. The essential element in religious tolerance is not what an individual does as much as what an individual refrains from doing. One should allow for freedom of descent and disagreement but the price of this freedom is the absence of judgment on another individual’s rights and autonomy.

³² Ibid., 122.

³³ See Acts 17:18-30 in which Paul speaks with the Athenian Epicurean and Stoic philosophers regarding the altar built “TO AN UNKOWN GOD.”

³⁴ Babić, 230.

³⁵ Paul Copan, *True For You But Not For Me: Overcoming objections to the Christian faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1998), 46.

³⁶ Lewis, C. S., *Letters of C. S. Lewis (13 March 1956)*, comp. Wayne Martindale and Jerry Root (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1990), 581-582.

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