

An Introduction to Tolerance

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[0 : 00] So this is an introduction to the issue of tolerance, or one of the ways of getting at it. and it's much bigger than I'll be able to tangle with tonight, but it's a really important issue.

Nietzsche wrote in 1870, what decides against Christianity now is our taste, not our arguments. Now, I think that, I think he was spot on then, but I think it's probably more true now, even than it was then.

And what he meant was that it's not just concepts, arguments, disproofs, anti-God discussion that lead people to dismiss, to abandon, to reject faith, or to just stonewall it and never even look at it. But it's their desires, their values, their preferences, their stories, their associations that they have with the Christian faith. So it's not linear, logical arguments that you can sort of graph, but it's all sorts of feelings, impressions, stories, associations.

This is why the question of tolerance, I think, is so important, because it has a lot to do with taste, with people's taste. Not just the taste for food, but think of your taste in decoration or clothes, or expand your notion of taste from food to your preferences about all sorts of things.

[1 : 20] One of the things that I think the Christian faith, that gives the Christian faith the worst bad taste today, is the conviction that Christians are intolerant.

Tolerance is one of the few things that our non-Christian, speaking for the States anyway, that our non-Christian neighbors are sure is a virtue. We're confused about all sorts of things, but we know to be open, non-judgmental, inclusive, and tolerant.

We know that's right. Nothing else that we can't be quite sure of, but we know that's right, says the non-Christian world around us. To be intolerant is one of the worst things we can be in the eyes of those same neighbors.

It weighs most heavily against us in terms of anybody taking our words seriously. It weighs heavily against us if it sticks to us.

So people who are intolerant are, in their ideas, prejudiced, arrogant, ethnocentric, bigoted, and probably lacking in goodwill toward anybody who's not just like them.

[2 : 25] Christians want to be tolerant people. Tolerance is a good thing. Tolerant is a good word. But many of us believe that Jesus is in a very certain way uniquely true, in such a way that actually excludes other people's claims to truth.

So we don't just say Jesus is true, but it's true in a way that actually means some other things can't be true. And so that conviction can put us in the gun sights of those who believe that tolerance is the only virtue.

And again, we want to be... We like tolerance. We're surprised.

Christians are also surprised by being beaten over the head with intolerance as a brick bat and why people find us that way. So we're treated as on low moral ground, being morally inferior because we believe what we believe, because of the idea of exclusiveness.

And so what's going on? I'm not going to have time to really lay out what I think our perspective is on tolerance, although I'll say a very brief word about it at the end. But I want to just examine this first accusation, this reflex response.

[3 : 43] When people hear you believe in Jesus Christ in a way that is solid and really rooted in the Bible, the reflex response will be, that's intolerant.

And so I want to look at that and maybe, hopefully, God willing, give you some resources to respond to that if you get it. And I suspect it's probably just as much here as in the States, because I live in Massachusetts, which is one of the blue states, as they say, which is very much more progressive, whatever that means, than most of the rest of the states.

And we get it 24-7. So I want to look at this basic confusion of the reflex response to biblical Christianity that is simply being intolerant.

Now, I want to look at three words here, and they're ism words, two of them are ism words, so don't be, but don't be put off by me using words that end in ism.

One is pluralism, the other is relativism, and the third is tolerance. I'll go fast here, and go right over, very lightly, you can pick up anything you want afterwards, but pluralism, that I mean religious pluralism, the plurality of religions.

[5 : 00] And what I'm talking about is, that word is used in different ways, but the way I'm using it is, it's just an uncontroversial statement that there's a plurality of religions out here.

You walk out on the street, and you'll meet Muslims, you'll meet Hindus, you'll meet Jewish people, you'll meet Sikhs, you'll meet every variety of agnostic, atheists, and so forth, and Christians.

There's a lot of different religious options out there.

That's completely non-controversial, okay? What's not non-controversial is, how do you interpret that plurality? How do we understand this diversity, this huge pot full of different religious claims, and movements?

And, for example, are they all true? Are none of them true? Is one true and all the rest false? Are three true and all the rest false?

Are they true, some more true than others? Or does nobody have a clue? Those are six possible ways of understanding what I'm calling religious pluralism.

[6 : 13] And, how to understand it is the really contentious issue, not the fact that there is a religious plurality out there. I want to just take one angle here, which is what I'm going to call relativism, which combines the first two, actually.

All are true and none are true. Religious relativism is not a social fact, like pluralism. It's just a fact about, there's a lot of religions out there.

Religious relativism is a philosophical doctrine, far-reaching philosophical doctrine, that tells you how to interpret, how to understand this enormous diversity of religions.

It has enormous power among people who have never even heard the word, or who heard the word and don't really know what the word on this means, but they like its taste.

Because its taste is all about inclusion. We include everybody. We exclude nobody. And that is a wonderful taste today to people. And let me just describe what that means.

[7 : 19] They'd say, relativism would say it makes no sense to speak of one religion being true and another being false, because no one has the equipment to know God anyway.

None of us can pretend to really know who God is with our equipment. We don't know how to, it says in Woody Allen's films, how do I know about God? I can't make this can opener work.

You know, and so he's, the basic, and it seems a very humble conviction that we don't have the equipment to know God. And, because how in the world would we do that?

We don't have the tools, we don't have the senses, whatever, it doesn't get us anywhere. So, in a sense, no religions are true in the sense that they could ever exclude one another.

So you're never going to say anything true about any one religion that would ever exclude another religion, because nobody knows, nobody has really a clue who God actually is. Enough to say who God is not. Do you see them?

[8 : 25] Getting out there. So, the first side of it is, is that no religions are true in what they actually claim for knowledge of God.

But the second claim is that they are all true, and that they know, they do more or less the same job for each group of people who embraces them as the other one. They provide some sort of meaning and purpose in life, some sort of psychological, focal point, and they provide social glue.

In other words, they keep groups of people together. Religious groups hold people together. Give social cohesion. And so, in a sense, none of them are true in what they really believe about God, because nobody knows, but they're all true, crying out loud, because they're all doing good jobs, or more or less good jobs, at holding people together, at giving people a sense of purpose, and so forth.

So, it's sort of like their view of us. Think of how they see us, or I'm saying, I'm speaking here, us as those who really believe in the Bible and believe in Christ. Not necessarily all of you do, but that's great.

That's fine if you're here, but I'm going to assume that. If, say, I say, I really like vanilla ice cream better than chocolate ice cream.

[9 : 42] Okay? No one's going to fight with me on that. No one's going to argue with me, because what do they know about my preferences? Who are they to argue about my preferences? But let's say I go on the road preaching the message, it's only vanilla ice cream that is true ice cream.

Chocolate ice cream, it's not the real thing. It really isn't true ice cream. Nor are any of the others. Coffee, strawberry, all these mixtures of things. Not real ice cream. The only one is vanilla ice cream.

Now, I've probably locked up before I got too far. But you see, I've made a huge transition. I've taken what is to me a taste, a preference and taste, and I've made it into a true or false thing itself. And, one isn't true and the other false just because I like one better than the other. And that's how the relativist sees me. And probably you too, because you believe there's truth in the Christian faith which actually excludes other truths.

There's a real thing and a not real thing. In a way, a counterfeit thing when we look at different religions. And that's the thing we've got to get our minds around of how we are seen.

[10 : 56] And that's why evangelism is so often so difficult and so uphill because very often Christians don't know how they're being perceived by the people they're talking to. They talk about Jesus as my personal savior or something like this and what the other person's hearing is they prefer this kind of ice cream or this kind of religion.

They respond best to this kind of religion rather than another kind of religion. And it doesn't compute. If we say you need to change, you need to believe in Jesus not in something else, that is just seen as what philosophers would call a category error.

That's like saying what color is geology? You know? And it's a clear error in terms of the kinds of things you're talking about. Okay. That's relativism. That's pluralism and relativism.

How does relativism work? And now I want to work at, let's bear in mind that the, from this position relativism appears to be humble, generous, tolerant, non-judgmental, and marvelous because this is just what the world needs because we're at each other's throats.

We're polarized on every important issue at least in America we are, that you can imagine. And so relativism, inclusion, is what we all need. We need a philosophical base for including each other and loving each other and creating a fruitful society.

[12 : 16] I don't think it's like that though. That is the taste that relativism spreads out across the world. But I'm just going to try and argue by using two of their own illustrations. I've been just talking about this for years but I want to put it together in a little bit different way than I have before anyway.

Two illustrations that they give and I bet most of you have heard both of them from those who are not Christians really dissing the Christian faith.

First one, the religions of the world are like a mountain and the different, or it's like a mountain and different religions are like roads up, different roads up the same mountain. And the roads are through the woods, through rocks, through rough areas so people on one road don't see or realize that there are any other roads up the mountain at all.

So you get to the top of the mountain and there is God and lo and behold everybody else is there too. All the people you thought you were alone going to inhabit the top of this mountain you discover whoa, all these people that we thought were just in a different planet have gotten there too because they've come up on roads that we didn't see.

And that of course sounds very welcoming, non-judgmental, accepting and so forth. Inclusive. The big word is inclusive and gives that position a wonderful taste that is very attractive to people.

[13 : 41] But I want to ask a question about this which is and if you get this remember this because the more you're talking to people who are really not Christians the more you're likely to hear this illustration used.

I want to ask where is the person who's describing this? Where is the person standing who's actually painting this picture? And if you stop and think about it that person has got to be in an airplane.

They've got to have an airplane. They've got to be looking down on this mountain from above to see the truth of what I've just described. Now I want to ask how come this relativist gets to be the only one who has an airplane?

When the rest of us and the leaders of most of the religions of the world are sweating with their knapsacks on their back up the mountain on one road or another.

Huffing and puffing sobbing for lunch going on or with days worth of travel or whatever sweating their way up the mountain. What this illustration actually shows is something very different from what the person is likely to think it shows who's telling it to you.

[14 : 51] Because what this actually shows is that relativism is not an all-inclusive thing, but it's one very high-handed interpretation of telling you how you must interpret all the religions of the world.

There's only one view that interprets all the religions of the world that is freed from the limitations of everybody huffing and puffing up the mountain and in their ignorance.

It's an over-religion of you from above and poses a single view which homogenizes the vast and rich religious diversity of religious thought and action and life on earth.

It puts it all into one piece and it can be interpreted all in one, must be interpreted all in one way. So the religious leaders of the world are mistaken because of their limited perspectives.

Of course they are. They're on one road, they can't see the whole picture. But I, as relativists, see it truly. So I am actually excluding them. And the relativists end up excluding most of the people in the world.

[15 : 54] And their convictions. Because the relativists alone has the true picture. Because they don't see things as they really are. Second illustration.

And again, I think most of you have probably heard this. The religions of the world are like blind men investigating an elephant. Okay? That goes back several thousand years. I think the Janes came up with this illustration.

And one man bumps into the leg of the elephant. The other gets a hold of the tail. The other gets a hold of the trunk. The other gets a hold of his ear or something like this. And he bumps into the side of the elephant. And he, the one who has the tree, has the, the leg, thinks he's found a tree.

Let's say the one who's got the trunk thinks he's got a snake. The one who has the ear thinks he has a leaf. Whatever. You can go on. They're all wrong because they need to combine their insights and put something together which they might even be able to figure out what it really was.

But here again, you have to ask basically the same question. How do we know it was an elephant? How do we get to know that it's an elephant?

[17 : 08] Only if the person who tells the story is a, is a sighted person, is not blind. And can see the elephant. And tell us that it's an elephant and this poor blind man can't see it, but it really is an elephant.

And how, I want to ask, how does this blind man get to be the, or how does this person rather get to be the only non-blind person, the only sighted person? And again, creating an over-religion, a meta-religion that interprets all the religions.

He's just making an exclusive claim, excluding all the ignorance of the blind men who have a hold, the religious leaders of the world who have a hold of different parts of the elephant. Coming down on top of the religious diversity that is there.

The religious leaders of the world are mistaken, are mistaken, of course they were, they're blind. Their views are excluded. So the teller sets us right of the story.

Now, what I'm saying here is that relativism in its taste, in its aura, in its projection, tastes inclusive, seems inclusive, seems wonderfully non-judgmental and welcoming everybody in, sounds very humble, and unwilling to exclude anybody.

[18 : 27] In fact, they exclude the vast majority of the world population. A main statement of relativism excludes the religious convictions of the vast majority of the people in the world.

This, I've always called the overbite of relativism. It assumes itself a very status that it criticizes. This is the relativist as a closet absolutist, or a stealth absolutist, whatever you may want to see that.

In other words, in reality, being very much an excluder for the reasons I've just described. Now, third word here, tolerance. My point isn't to criticize relativism for being intolerant, because it excludes other people's religious beliefs.

It's actually impossible to have any religious convictions at all, and not exclude a huge number of very sincere people, excluding their religious convictions.

It's impossible. Let me say that again. It's impossible to have any religious convictions at all, without excluding sincere religious convictions, of an enormous number of people.

[19 : 38] The only way you can avoid excluding people is to have no convictions at all. Then you just go mute, and not believe anything yourself, which is, of course, impossible, because you can't.

There's no default position when it comes to religion. religion. This is because the differences between religion are so big, like ideas of God, are real differences, and they're huge differences, and if they're taking them on their own terms, they contradict each other.

They mutually exclude each other. There's God, there's no God, God is personal, God is impersonal, God is trinity, God is one. All those really are views of God that don't just mix together nicely.

Unless we deny the real claims of each one, and interpret them differently, like interpret them only in how they function or how they help people, sure, all religions of the world can help people, if that's what we're talking about that's different, but this is the claims of the religion themselves. If we exclude another person's belief in the sense of disagree with it, that is not being intolerant, that is just being discerning and understanding the nature of the world, that these different claims deny each other.

[20 : 56] We may be intolerant for all sorts of other reasons, but not for disagreeing with the truth claims of somebody's religion. Do you see what I'm saying? There's all sorts of ways to be intolerant, but not by just saying what somebody believes I believe is wrong because I believe something different.

That's not intolerant, that's inescapable. Nobody cannot do that. So, my relativists exclude my beliefs, and that's okay, it's a free country, fair enough.

I don't have any grievance with that. My grievance is not because relativism excludes me. My grievance is for them not being honest about excluding me. I want them to fess up and admit that they exclude my beliefs, and they're not being wonderfully inclusive of everybody.

I want relativists to admit that they exclude me and my beliefs, rather than maintain some sort of high moral ground because they exclude nobody, because they include everybody, which they do not.

They're not including everybody in the way people understand their own religious convictions. Now, this is beginning to get to the challenge back here. So, again, my grievance with relativism isn't intolerance, is dishonesty, and having a taste that does not match the reality of what's actually going on, and projecting a taste throughout the world of inclusiveness and non-judgmentalism and everything is lovely.

[22 : 27] So, just conclude here by saying my aim is very practical, and this is what I always try and do with our students coming through who are influenced by relativism, is to try to get them to see the that they've got to come down off their high moral ground of moral superiority because they include everybody rather than being a nasty person like a Christian who excludes some people.

I want to proporcise them to come down off your high moral ground and sit on a level playing field with me. And we can sit down on a level playing field in the grass and talk to each other, one absolutist to another.

One stubborn absolutist maybe to another. And so we can talk on even terms, nobody having the high moral ground for being never excluding everybody. We both exclude people for crying out loud.

Let's sit down and talk and we can care for each other. We can listen to each other's stories. We can even love each other and we can try and persuade each other that the other one is wrong. So that's my target.

That's all the ground I'm going to try and cover here. But that is a huge place to cover because we carry on so much discussion in an evangelistic slash apologetic situation where we are seen to be on low moral ground for exactly this reason.

[23 : 42] Let's bring them down and admit we're all on the level playing field. We're all absolutists. But we can talk and we can love each other and we can share each other's stories and reach an amazing level of understanding of each other.

Now, I'm not going to go on and do this lecture on tolerance, but let me just say a couple of quick things about how I see tolerance and then I'll throw it open.

There's three kinds of tolerance that are significant here. One, legal or political tolerance. That means it's okay to be a Muslim, a Hindu, a Christian, a Buddhist, or whatever in England now, as it is in the U.S.

today. And there's no political, legal restriction on worshiping, places of worship, publications, and so on, as it was a long time ago.

I mean, John Milton fought for the freedom to have people able to publish anything they wanted. I don't know about anything they wanted, but a lot more.

[24 : 49] In other words, the Church of England was censoring every publication, and because it's not safe to let people publish things that are false, that are non-Christian, or not our view of the Christian faith.

And he fought against that, saying that the Christian faith actually thrives best when it's not supported by the coercive power of the law. And he was one of the people starting the ball rolling toward religious tolerance.

And I think I, from the Bible, studying it carefully, would be very much in favor of any government allowing full religious freedom of belief and of most practices practices, say.

You can't say all practices maybe, but like, for example, in the States, there's what we call the First Amendment, which is that no religion is going to be established by the federal government, no state church, but the federal government will guarantee the free exercise of any religion.

You see what I'm saying? So that's religious tolerance. Now, even there, they've had to take away the freedom of, for example, Jehovah's Witnesses to keep their kids from getting blood transfusions, and Mormons from polygamy.

[26 : 10] This probably wouldn't have passed today, but it did pass in the 19th century. and certain Native American groups from using peyote legally in their worship services.

So there are certain places where the government has said you can cross a line and we think your religious freedom actually endangers the state and the common good.

But otherwise, everything's fair game. I believe that. That's a good thing, and I think we ought to fight for that. As Christians, we ought to fight for the right to everybody to believe what they want to believe and not try and take refuge in the power of the law used to lift us up as Christians.

For example, I think as late as 1870, you couldn't go to Oxford or Cambridge without being a member of the Church of England. Not just being a Christian, but being a member of the Church of England. I don't think that works in the favor of the cause of Christ.

I'll leave that. The second kind of tolerance or toleration is social and personal, which means, and here again, I would entirely think the Bible teaches us to be respectful, kind, loving, and make friends of people with different religious convictions, coming from different religious traditions.

[27 : 36] We're obligated to reach out, to not discriminate against people, to not alienate people, not disrespect people because of believing something different. If we believe the Bible, we will treat non-Christians well.

If we believe and follow the Bible, we will treat non-Christians very well. The third kind of tolerance, and this is the really, I believe in the first two, the third is really dangerous and has a tremendous momentum today, is that tolerance means that you are as tolerant of everybody's ideas and practices and behavior as you are of your own.

Think about that. You are as tolerant of other people's beliefs and respectful of other people's beliefs as much as you are of your own. I want to say, first of all, that that's impossible.

Logically impossible. You can't. How can I be, as a United States citizen, be as respectful of the beliefs of the Ku Klux Klan as I am of my own beliefs?

I would have to have no beliefs to do that. You just can't do that. The different beliefs are mutually exclusive. You can't possibly respect other people's beliefs.

[28 : 52] But that's what we have coming at us and that's where we are judged as being intolerant because we say, I can't respect their beliefs. I can love them. I can love the person. Tolerance in the Bible is for the person, not for their beliefs, for their ideas, or necessarily their behavior, or necessarily their ideas.

They have perfectly good ideas, too. But I can't be tolerant of all their beliefs and behavior. Jesus certainly wasn't.

He was being quite exclusive. You whitewash tombs. You make people twice as much a child in hell. You make converts of the end of the world, you make them twice as much a child in hell as they were before you left.

Or Paul, in 2 Corinthians 10, we destroy arguments in every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God. And so God doesn't consider all ideas about him and truths about him or behavior to be equal,

to be all the same and to be approved.

No, some are really to be excluded. So this is the threat we have coming at us, is people who talk of tolerance demanding tolerance as equal respect for claims for truth and behavior.

[30 : 15] And that I think we must really stand against. It's in a strong form irrational and it totally undercuts all that we believe. But that's just crunching a longer lecture.

But let me stop there. Any feedback on this? I'd be happy to kick this around if anyone's interested. Again, if you're interacting much with people who aren't Christians, I can't imagine this isn't really on the front burner.

Any thoughts? Do you think that liberty is a more helpful concept than tolerance?

That's good. I would say liberty and love. That's part of the rest of the lecture. I think biblically, tolerance is a kind of insipid, gray, feeble virtue.

It means literally tolerate, endure somebody. The word *tolerare* in Latin means to endure somebody or to endure something. That's pretty minimal.

[31 : 21] In the chapter on love, in Corinthians 13, we're meant to bear all things and endure all things, we're meant to hope and believe all things.

Now, the bearing and enduring is tolerance, but we're meant to hope and believe, which is going way beyond tolerance. We're meant to hope and believe for somebody, as well as all the other things in that passage.

So, tolerance, I see, is a very minimal virtue. issue. So, I've been arguing for it. It's good. It's better to have it than not, where it's called for.

But it's nothing like what's really required of us. Let me just throw out one other thought here. Sorry. In the sense of the enlightenment, the standard way of understanding things is that the more religious conviction you have, the less tolerance you have.

okay? So, it's like a seesaw, like a child's seesaw. If conviction is heavy, tolerance will be light. If tolerance is heavy, conviction will be light.

[32 : 30] You see what I'm saying? And, I mean, you can see where they get that. I mean, you can see, just look at the Taliban or something like that. I would hate to be judged on religious level of certainty against the Taliban.

You know what I mean? Or all sorts of people who have just a level of certainty out of sight that I think is maybe even unhealthy.

So, the assumption coming at us is that we can only make, even someone like the theologian Ryan O. Niebuhr would say that we can only make room for tolerance by religious indifference.

He says, religious humility is really too hard to come by, so the only way we can get tolerance is by indifference. That's a pretty cynical voice from Ryan O. Niebuhr. But that's the way we've been given to understand it.

I would just point to say, actually, no. Even though sometimes Christians can be seen to exemplify this, the image that we get from the scriptures, and insofar as we're really rooted in the scriptures, not just in our thinking, but by the way we live, it's the truth, conviction of the truth, and tolerance ride the same elevator, up and down.

[33 : 39] So the more you're convinced of the truth, the more you're going to love your enemies, the more you're going to love uphill, upstream, against, you're going to forgive, you're going to seek reconciliation, all these interpersonal things that are so built around love as the basic driving force.

And the Great Commission behind that is why we do that, because we love people, and we love God, and it's love that's the driving force behind this.

So I want to see it as conviction of the truth and tolerance on the same ride in the same elevator.

And that's much better, if you need a visual illustration, it's a much better one than the seesaw.

Although Christians have been very, you know, put in a bad shell in many times, and I guess you have to say probably all of us have at one time in our lives, but certain places there have been major Christian movements that are very intolerant in the ways they should have been tolerant.