

The Fallacy of Tolerance

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As a survivor of the Holocaust, the consequence of one of the greatest legally instituted intolerance, I hoped that we could find an antidote for that social cancer that has infected many societies resulting in millennia of inter-group hostilities. I too, like so many, have succumbed to the view that to achieve a harmonious society we need to inculcate an attitude of tolerance toward others who have different cultures than the majority, belong to different races and worship different gods. I believed that if religions would have indoctrinate the faithful and public schools would have socialized the students to accept and abide by tolerance it would act as a prophylaxis against the conditions that in Germany have led to the Holocaust. In fact tolerance became the "buzz-word" and was perceived as the panacea for all problems associated with social discrimination

Yet, with time, I found that my view of the power of tolerance as a peace maker is quite flawed. In careful analysis of the meaning and nature of tolerance I

concluded that while tolerance is a desirable virtue (in contrast to a moral authority) and it may even affect some people's relationship with members of other races and religions, it will not, on its own merit eliminate the social conditions that are the root causes of inter-ethnic, religious, and racial hostilities. In this paper I will advance the reasons why, I believe, the teaching of tolerance will not eradicate inter-group aggression.

The first reason why tolerance, in my view, will not overcome the conditions that have led to inter-group hostilities and kept societies from developing inter group harmony is rooted in its definition. Inherent in the meaning of tolerance is that is a sub-rosa negative view of the people or things that we are asked to tolerate. In fact, contrary to the intended purpose as a producer of social harmony, the word tolerance creates, reinforces, and legitimates the view which in the first place has led to the existing disharmony.

The meaning of the word tolerance proposes, perhaps indirectly, a stereotypical view of the minorities whom we are asked to tolerate. Consider the dictionary definition of tolerance which defines it as the capacity to endure. We use the word tolerance to indicate that in certain conditions we need, perhaps must endure certain unavoidable and undesirable events or conditions. For instance, under certain circumstances we must learn to tolerate pain. Or, we must learn to tolerate certain

unfavorable environmental factors such as pollution because we cannot alter the conditions in which we exist. Similarly we are told that we must learn to tolerate and accept diverse human beings even when they may be considered by us as undesirable. We are asked to tolerate them not only because they are a part of life and quite often perform a necessary and important function for society, but, more importantly it is an exercise of the Christian value of love. We are asked therefore, in the name of Christian love to endure these conditions. This perspective is similar to my mother's reasoning when I, as a young boy, fought with my younger brother. "Tuli" she would say, "you are the older one and you have more reason. Give in to your brother. Be tolerant of him." She appealed to my ego and defining me as older and hence smarter than my brother and hence it is up to me to be tolerant of him.

The idea to be tolerant of others does not redefine the nature of the people whom we are asked to endure. We do not describe those whom we are to tolerate as being equal to us because in order that we become tolerant we must admit that an undesirable condition exists otherwise the request to tolerate makes no sense. Similarly, those who are being tolerated are also asked to be tolerant of those who seek to harm them. This is, for instance, inherent in the religious teaching of turning the other cheek. The sufferers, the mistreated, and the abused are

taught to be tolerant of their tormentors because they are told that such suffering is a virtue and it will lead to rewards in the world to come. The famous statement by Jesus "Father forgive them for they know not what they do" is an example of the need, at least in Christianity, for the sufferers to tolerate their tormentors. By forgiving the tormentors I become the better person and spiritually more advanced to them and most importantly it will assure a better life in heaven. After all, it is far more difficult for the rich to receive salvation than for the elephant to pass through the eye of a needle. Gary Marx, in his study, of black minister's attitude to Martin Luther King found that those who believed and advocated the primacy of religious salvation were less likely to support the civil right movement demand justice than those who placed primacy to this worldly life.

If I and other Jews, and for that matter all minorities, are to be tolerated by the majority who hold power in society then, by the very definition of the term, I must consider myself, as a Jew, an undesirable although an inevitable part in the lives of the majority. Members of the majority, the powerful majority, may not like the minorities in this country but, we, the minority groups, ask the majority to develop the virtue of tolerance and apply it toward us. Are the American Jews or other minorities an inevitable pain or natural calamity that the majority must learn to endure? Notice

that it is the minorities who are asking the majority for tolerance, and, not vice versa. Members of the majority do not seek or request to be tolerated. Instead they demand justice, freedom, the social conditions that they consider to be their inalienable rights. Should not minorities also expect these self-same privileges? Should not the minorities too be given the same rights that are demanded by the majority?

The inequitable relationship between lower and higher classes, between the tolerating and those being tolerated is described by Aristotle. Living in Athens in a highly stratified society he proposed that only the gentlemen of high social status can possess the quality of virtues. Only they have the capacity for magnanimity and munificence. This is similar to the medieval notion inherent in the virtue of noblesse oblige that proposes that although those in power who possess wealth and power they should as a matter of Christian charity and because of their greater moral sensitivity exercise tolerance toward those in the lower rungs of society. Privilege it is proposed carries with it a burden. This is their burden: they must develop in themselves the virtues of magnanimity and munificence and be helpful to and tolerant of the lower classes. When in trouble, the lower rungs of the social stratum can appeal to those in the upper stratum that they, because of their social status, should be tolerant and should therefore grant them the

favor to be left alone and the right to exist. Traditionally, the lower classes never demanded their rights. They merely entreat the super-ordinate classes who have the power and control over them that they, the possessors of virtues and character, should also have a sense of fairness when relating to them. The sub-ordinate class' relationship with the super-ordinate is modeled on the manner that religion instructs us to relate to God. In Judaism, for instance, prior to petitioning God for his mercies people recite the thirteen attributes of God (Exodus 34:6-7) and remind Him that as the possessor of all good attributes He should deal kindly with the petitioner. Whether we follow Judaism, Christianity, or Islam we never place demands on God we always petition Him. Thus, if we propose that relationships between social strata should be governed by tolerance then we also provide the ideology by which we legitimate the continual existence of power and privilege differences. In short, tolerance does not alter the social conditions that made tolerance necessary in the first place.

Let us look at another aspect of tolerance, namely that those who ask for tolerance must pay for the privilege of being tolerated. The price the tolerated pay is contained in the norm of reciprocity that proposes that those who ask for tolerance must also be tolerant of those who are superior in the social stratum. But because

tolerance does not ask the upper classes to relinquish their exercise of power the price the minorities must pay for being tolerated is to abstain from being critical of the majority. For Jews that meant that they cannot be critical of and fault Christians not only for their beliefs that have advocated intolerance but, also for the societal laws that are founded on Christian beliefs and its theology. Sunday has always been imposed on all people, for believers and non believers alike. Similarly Christmas was considered a holiday and it is binding on every one. Any criticism that challenged the right of the Christian majority to impose its values as laws was considered as lacking the sense of gratefulness that minorities should have for the privilege of having the right to exist in this "free" country.

I was told of a *repartee* between Alan Dershowitz the noted lawyer and Pat Robertson a former candidate for the Presidency and founder of the Christian Network regarding the legitimacy of having Christian prayers in the public schools. Dershowitz opposed class room prayer. It was his view that those who wish to pray should be given access to a room in which prayers could be offered before classes begin. Reverend Robertson opposed this view. Instead, he proposed that those who do

not wish to participate in prayers should leave the room. In his view Christians have the right to offer prayers in the classroom, "after all" he argued "we were here first. Others should be grateful for the tolerance and freedom that they are granted." (This story was related to me by David Myerson a friend of Derschowitz.)

This demand for submission to, and being non critical of, the majority became evident to me in another way. After arriving to the United States I was often asked "How do you like America?" In the beginning I was not aware that this question was merely a rhetorical one similar to the question "How are you?" When one is asked about the state of his health he should be aware that it is merely a courtesy question for which the standard response "OK." Very few, if any at all, of the questioners wish to hear a lengthy response about the others state of health. Similarly when I was asked about my view of the U.S no one really wished for me to tell them what I really thought. The expected response to the question was "I like it very much." After all I was a tolerated immigrant and as such I must indicate my respect and adoration of my new homeland. But due to my ignorance of expectations I thought their query was genuine and I proceeded to expound my view. So long as I

was complementary to the US the questioner was polite and he feigned interest. However, when I became somewhat critical of the U.S. his (or her) response was immediate and harsh. Most often it came as the following abhor "Well, if you don't like it here why don't you go back were you came from." As a foreigner I was tolerated only to the extent that I do not challenge any aspect of my host country's superiority over all other countries.

This price for being tolerated was strongly evident when I visited Oxford in England. I commented to Jewish professors while attending synagogue services that during my two month stay there I never encountered any public criticisms by Jews against England's negative policies towards Israel. Their response was "we do not dare." In short they felt that Jews in England are still viewed as tolerated strangers and if the Jews in England were to criticize English policies their freedom to exist as Jews would be in danger. Of course, Jews in England have in the past encountered official anti-Semitism. They were not only expelled from the country but also experienced a number of massacres.

An additional problem with tolerance is that it seeks to seeks to improve society by changing the individuals in it. There is a prevalent, albeit an

erroneous assumption that guides our politics is that the way to improve society is through improving the individuals that constitute society. This perspective is related to our view of society. Most people believe that society is not an entity in its own right, as Durkheim referred to as being "sui generic." Rather, they see society merely the sum of the individuals in it. This perspective leads most Americans to believe that if we were to improve the quality of the individuals that constitute the society it will, ipso facto, improve society itself. Perhaps a most extreme example of this point of view is reflected in Mr. Maddox's, a former governor of Georgia, view of how to improve the prison system. In his view if we were to get a better quality of prisoners the system would improve by itself. In short, if we would improve the character of the people who compose this country, that is, if we but inculcate into children the need to love our neighbors and to be tolerant of their differences we would improve the quality of interpersonal relationships. This point of view unfortunately, is not valid. Society and the individuals in it are two separate entities in which the individual has little impact on the nature of society. To the contrary, it is society that molds and shapes the character and nature of the individual.* (Most studies on identity formation agree with George Herman Mead's view of the singular impact society has on its people.)

I have already pointed out that individualism is one and perhaps most fundamental value orientation in this society. Max Weber and others have argued that it is the secularized Protestant value that led to the rise of individualism and simultaneously to an opposition to collectivism. Weber argued that it is the rise of secular individualism that was the foundation on which capitalism and modernity rests. In this ethos of individualism MacIntyre points out "each of us is taught to see himself or herself as an autonomous moral agent; but each of us also becomes engaged by modes of practice, aesthetic or bureaucratic, which involve us in manipulative relationships with others." (68) In such an ethos the impact of collective moral perspective on the individual has waned. MacIntyre thus suggests that what is needed to day is the re-introduction of personal virtues. MacIntyre's view is that in most modern societies the individual is isolated from society's rule and the individual become an entity all by himself and to himself.

While on the one hand individualism as an ideology, helped individuals to free themselves from society's impact and from the yoke imposed by the church and monarchies but on the other hand the newly acquired personal freedom leave the individuals to their own devices without any powerful force to guide them or constrain them from egoism and associated excesses. Under

such condition there is a rise in suicide rates (Durkheim) and quite frequently they are also subject to fear of the future that often results in rage. (Fromm) Only submission to social moral and not the possession of individual virtues that can provide societal stability. This is of course dependent of whether the social morals are based on justice.

Another reason why we in the United States have elevated tolerance as a moral virtue and designated it as the sine qua non for the making of a harmonious society is our faith in the efficacy of the Christian teaching of love. However, it should be quite evident that this religious teaching in the last two millennia has improved neither the individual nor society or the nature of human relationships in societies. How often have we heard that white slave owners quite often had great affections for their slaves? Such affections to "mammies" for instance did not change the nature of super ordinate and subordinate relationships nor the customs, traditions, and the laws that governed owner and slave relations.

The Christian principle of love presupposes that we must exercise charity and benevolence to all. This commitment however is never a true commitment. The principle of love as a guide for human relationships as I examine in my other essays (included in a forthcoming book and elsewhere) is fraught with many problems. Most importantly, love does not address itself to the issue of

rights. Inequitable treatment and the justification for differential access to life's chances do not violate the principle of Christian love. Love, does not raise a critical question whether differential treatment and quality of life associated with social positions in a stratified society is justifiable. Love, I propose, is the ideology that laid the foundation for the development of the medieval ethic of noblesse oblige, the laissez faire ethic of early capitalism, and the benevolent ethic of the latter nineteenth and the twentieth century benevolent ethic.

Let me comment briefly on the benevolent ethic that I believe still dominates our perception of what should guide human relationships in a stratified society. Fundamentally the benevolent ethic proposes that social classes have a moral covenant. Malthus, Bendix reports, felt that "the higher classes need to meet their responsibilities effectively and enable the "lower classes" to mitigate their distress to the extent that this was within the power of man." (Bendix p.79) In this moral view of inter-class relationship, Bendix reports, the upper classes have a responsibility toward the lower classes in the same manner as the Devine Providence has a responsibility to the well being of the higher classes. Malthus transformed Burke's earlier writing in this regard. He proposes that the upper and middle classes need to better "the conditions of the poor; to show them

what they can and what they cannot do; and that, although much may be done by advice and instruction, by encouraging habits of prudence and cleanliness, by discriminate charity, and by any mode of bettering the present condition of the poor... (Quoted in Bendix 80)

The duties that the upper classes have towards the lower classes are contingent upon the duties of the lower classes to listen to and comply with the advice given to them by the superior classes.

Charitable help that is given by the superior classes to the lower ones has always assumed the character of a gift. However, the person who is the recipient of a gift becomes beholden to the giver till the receiver can reciprocate with a gift of equal value. In this manner those who possess greater wealth can exercise personal charity and in this manner make the recipients remain subservient to the giver. It is this relationship upon which benevolent ethic is founded. (See Marcel Mauss in *Annae Sociologicae* 1923-1924)

I must now consider another problem with tolerance as a social value to guide inter-group relationships and this is its similarity to cultural relativity. Those who follow the relativist perspective propose that we cannot judge the moral standards of two ethnic, racial, or religious groups by the same standard. Different groups, they argue, respond to social reality in different manner and hence their moral and ethical values will develop

relative to the conditions in which they exist. For instance, societies that live in areas that have scarce resources will emphasize the importance of competition and will reflect the adage that moral standards should reflect the reality that is that in society each person stands in a competitive and war like relationship with other persons. On the other hand, societies where food can be gained only by common effort the emphasis will be on collectivism. For instance the plains Indians whose main sustenance was derived from hunting the Buffalo had to develop the value of cooperation. This point of view led to the idea that we must tolerate differences because the values that motivate behavior differ from group to group. This perspective is inherent in the social philosophy that stresses the idea of laissez faire laissez passé. Live and let live and let each person have the freedom to live as one pleases. This perspective then proposes that people representing different cultures must be given total freedom of speech and action. We must be tolerant of diversity.

But, must we tolerate all diversities in the same manner that we must tolerate diversities of thought and speech? This question has not been problematic to those who advocate tolerance. To them we should tolerate all diversities even though they may oppose the values that we hold dear to us. The question is never raised: Are there occasions when we should be intolerant of teachings

that not only stand in a diametric opposition to ours but deny the values that we consider fundamental to a just civil society? Such was the question that Oliver Wendell Holmes faced by inquiring whether there are no limits to constitutionally guaranteed freedom of speech. In 1919 in his ruling in *Schenk vs. US* he proposed that there are limits to one's freedom of speech. His famous example was that no one has the right to shout fire in a theater. When a speech creates a clear and present danger to a universal moral standard, such as advocating hatred of other groups, then the constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech should be rescinded. Hence, when any person advocates ideas that can lead to the violation of other's rights to life and freedom and when it clearly creates danger to others his ideas should not be tolerated. At such occasions we must indeed become intolerant.

This is indeed a difficult situation, that is, the question whether and to what extent we should deny some ones right to speak. It could be argued that such denial not only violates fundamental freedom but it also does not let the market place of ideas reject unwanted and dangerous ideas.

Let me hasten to add the following caveat. I am not opposed to tolerance, nor do I seek to deny that love provides an important contribution to the development of a quality of life. As of this writing I've been married

fifty seven years and I doubt whether I could have overcome the effects of the Holocaust were it not the love I received from my wife and children. The Talmudic rabbis have instructed us about the importance of love and they held up the relationship between David and Jonathan as the epitome of unselfish friendship in which the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David. Such friendship is indeed rewarding. But no one can love every one else. Perhaps, love could have served as an integrative force in very small villages of the past - relationships that is represented in a *gemeinschaft* or in small communal societies guided by the principle of agape. In such a society the tolerance of strangers would, of course, be central to a stranger who happened to live within that community. Tolerance, however, as I have pointed out is not an effective force in a highly pluralistic society. Is there another value that should be substituted, one that could overcome egoism and self orientation so common in a modern highly differentiated society in which every one is seeking his own rather than the happiness of the collective?

I would like to suggest as did Jefferson in his inaugural address that without justice freedom itself would be destroyed. What is needed is "equal and exact

justice to all men, of whatever state of persuasion, religious and political." (31 Bellah et.al.)

Central in the concept "justice" is the idea of equity. For instance, justice in economic terms would assure the existence of equitable reciprocity between buyer and seller. Such equity could be expressed in terms of equity of value that is, that the money one offers the seller of an object reflects the equity of effort expended by the seller who is the creator of the object. If the seller is not the creator than the price should reflect the sellers investment and the effort required to bring the object to the market. It is not our intention here to deal with the principle of equity in economics. I am using this merely as an example of the principle of justice.) Justice in contractual relationships is also based of an equitable exchange. To Durkheim any contract that reflects an inequitable relationship, even though agreed by both parties, is not valid. Justice demand that equity must exist in all human relationships. From this sense just social relationship exists when all people in the system are given the same privileges and duties. The Bible expresses this in the following manner. It tells us that in a just society the rich should not be honored in court for his wealth or the

poor favored for his poverty.

Of course, human rights, in spite of Jefferson's reference that the Creator has endowed these on all human beings, are not divinely ordained but are social creations. It is that Jefferson's reference to God is merely a means by which he seeks to legitimate the idea of equal access to rights. After all, through out history, the name of God has also been used to deny both rights and love. Looking at the history of religion and especially of Christianity Feuerbach rightfully argues that "whenever morality is based on theology, whenever the right is made dependent on divine authority, the most immoral, unjust, infamous things can be justified and established.(274) From my experiences I found Feuerbach's view valid, specifically, that the Christian world has from its incipency in the name of God denied Jews their right to an economic life and often to life in general. How well I remember that in 1938 the Hungarian government decreed by *fiat* that Jewish stores in my home town Munkacs should not exceed seven percent. We have used many ways to legitimate human inequality. How many people accepted that the denial of life to Jews or to institute slavery has been ordained by God? The legitimacy of equitable human rights resides neither in God nor in any

other super-natural force. Its legitimacy resides only in our accord that equitable justice is not only necessary to eliminate discord in a highly diversified society but that it is in its own right a moral imperative.

In the last two hundred years from the time that we crafted our constitution we have placed an inordinate stress on individual rights in the face of government. This is quite understandable. After all, our struggle for national independence was simultaneously a struggle for the individual's independence from an autocratic government. No wonder therefore that we have never placed equal emphasis on individual duties. Rights and corresponding duties, privileges and responsibilities are two sides of the same coin - they constitute the totality of just rights. One cannot demand rights without also accepting his duties. In short, when we seek that governments grant us our individual rights we must also be willing to take on our duties to the government. We have in many ways rejected our duties to the collective. We wish to be protected but at the same time we do not wish to serve in the armed forces. We wish to receive help when we encounter economic difficulties but quite often we are not willing to help ourselves. There is a rising swell in public opinion that we have gone far a

field in granting personal rights without requiring a commitment to corresponding duties and self help. This is most evident in opposition to the four decades of quota systems. Justice demands equity between personal rights and duties.

In contrast to love and tolerance, rights and duties do not require that individuals must emphasize the ideals of care and love for others. I do not wish to deny that were we to develop personal virtues that would include these personal qualities it may enhance the quality of people's lives. After all, it is nice feeling when someone cares for me, or can empathize with my pain. But, to have these virtues do not alter the nature of social relationships. But when I am granted my rights and I accept my duties then I do not have to depend on the tolerance of others. Once I possess my rights and I am willing to accept also my duties then I can be free from discrimination. Under such conditions I need not come to the majority, hat in hand, and ask the powerful to tolerate me. When we achieve this type of society we would have gone not in the right direction toward the creation of an equitable society but also toward a more harmonious society.