

# The Tyranny of the Tolerant

*Tolerance is the virtue of people who don't believe anything.* G.K. Chesterton

*Not everything is to be tolerated. No society can do without intolerance, indignation, and disgust; they are the forces behind the moral law.* Lord Patrick Devlin

When describing the most cherished characteristic of their nation, Canadians usually mention toleration first. They take pride in their tolerance, freedom of speech, and their ability to welcome people from every tribe and nation. Toleration is believed to be one of the greatest virtues of our Western society. It is valued more highly than truth. It is mentioned as soon as Canadians are confronted with religious convictions and truth claims.

## Change in meaning

In the past, intolerance meant bigotry or prejudice - that is judging someone or excluding people because of the colour of their skin or their country of origin, or ridiculing people for their beliefs. It also usually implied an attempt to use force to oppose other points of views. Intolerance, in the old sense, offends. And Christians would agree with the Webster Dictionary's definition of tolerance as "readiness to allow others to believe or act as they judge best." It is a benevolent attitude to views and practices different from one's own.

But the word tolerance has changed in meaning. In modern parlance intolerance has come to mean simply disagreeing with anyone's beliefs. Tolerance now is willingness to respect lifestyles, no matter how deviating they may be from the society's standard for behaviour. The practical outcome of the modern view of tolerance is that now everything seems to be acceptable.

In 1982, Dr. Esther R. Greenglass, of the department of psychology at York University, Toronto, Ontario, said that increased liberalization in sexual attitudes has resulted in growing acceptance of lesbianism and male homosexuality. She states that gay people, like heterosexuals, have a right to live with dignity, particularly in a pluralistic society. And she believes that this will be possible only when societal attitudes change sufficiently toward the "acceptance of the gay lifestyle." And the latter has become more and more acceptable. If you object you are called homophobic and intolerant. Numerous companies now provide employee benefits to same-sex partners. Since 1992, the Government of Ontario has also provided similar benefits.

The same government funds a program to train physicians in the delivery of "abortion services." It also provides full funding for five free-standing abortion clinics, including \$420,000 to improve security. It also covers abortion-related travel costs for women in remote areas. What was once seen as sin has now become acceptable. In a matter of a few decades Canadian society has dramatically changed. It has become deChristianized. Perhaps, as the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre suggested, we are already in the new dark ages.

## **George Grant (1918-1988)**

The Canadian Christian philosopher George Grant, astute observer of the changing mores in Canada, wrote that the more people live in a new mass society, the more the old systems of meaning no longer hold them, and the less they are able to see any relation between "old faiths and the practical business of living." In 1959 he wrote that already then the masses no longer appealed to the Bible as the source of meaning. Grant believed that the old idea that "truth shall make you free" had almost entirely disappeared. And he pointed to the acceptance of the belief that an idea is true as long as it is profitable for our lives. Grant also exposed the fallacy of this way of thinking. It failed to provide moral standards. Grant argued:

If you say that the right is "the expedient in the way of our behaving," how can there be any room for the categorically wrong? May not the torture of children sometimes be expedient and therefore right? To say that any idea is true as long as it is profitable involves saying that the judicial condemnation of the innocent can be justified, because it is certainly often profitable in the lives of men and nations.

## **The roots of modern tolerance**

The present-day idea of tolerance is a definite break from the teachings of 16th century Reformers. In the 17th century there was a shift from God to man. Man became the measure of all things. Already John Locke (1632-1704) in England vigorously pleaded in favour of tolerance. He was one of the architects of the modern humanist spirit. This humanism exalted reason. It put a stamp on society. Reason, it was argued, was capable of telling all that we need to know about God and morality. It seemed to be the answer to all our problems and faith seemed to be only a superstition. The authority of reason was believed to be self-evident and binding. Locke's humanistic idea of toleration presupposes the relativity of all truth claims. He taught that tolerance of religious differences is essential and ought to be extended to all, except to atheists.

One of the most representative advocates of tolerance in the 18th century was Voltaire (1694-1778) in France. He was deeply influenced by John Locke's view on toleration. Voltaire's toleration excluded only atheists and religious fanatics, as the latter are intolerant of others who do not hold the same beliefs. He allowed a person to believe anything he wanted as long as he did not intrude on the rights of his neighbours.

Voltaire in turn had a great influence on King Frederick the Great of Prussia (1740-1786) who turned his country into a great power. Frederick was a rationalist and indifferent to the Christian faith. He denied the Protestant tradition of Prussia and of the house of Hohenzollern, instead focussing his policies on the secularization of the state. One of his first measures was the tolerance edict of 1740, the elaboration of his statement: "Everybody has to be saved here in his own way." Prof. J. Kamphuis

remarked: "Tolerance and absolutism here go together! Here is one of the historical backgrounds of the totalitarian national-socialism of our age."

The British philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) argued that there was no rational proof for any religious concept and called for religious tolerance on the grounds of this uncertainty. However, his tolerance level did not include priests. He advocated that their powers and numbers be limited as he considered them dangerous to public peace.

The German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), called "the apostle of toleration," attempted to reunite Protestants and Catholics. This effort ended in failure. Later he tried to unite Lutheran and Reformed Churches in Germany. Underlying both plans was the conviction that doctrine is unimportant and that only non-essentials divide Christians.

The German philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) argued that all religions (especially Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) are manifestations of the worship of the one God, and that none is final or superior to the other. He concluded, therefore, that all religions should be tolerant of one another and should stress their similarities rather than their differences.

This brief overview of some key thinkers on tolerance shows that they were unwilling to regard any truth as important that could not be understood or proved by reason. They believed that their version of truth was obvious to all people and important; they thought religious truth uncertain and consequently unimportant. Their idea of tolerance was based on indifference to Christianity. And they set their own limits to toleration.

### **Opposition to Christianity**

Standing on the shoulders of the 17th and 18th century humanists, modern secular thinkers view tolerance as a hardwon victory after many centuries of intolerance. Orthodox Christianity is seen as a threat to tolerance and civil stability. A case in point is the recent filing of a petition in Montreal asking the Quebec Superior Court to ban the Bible from public places. The filer argues that the Bible promotes violence, racism and discrimination and incites incest, and therefore it contravenes the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms! Ian S. Markham, a British theologian at the University of Exeter, observed that the secularist, who has given up the quest for truth and therefore moral debate and rational dialogue, is the greater danger to tolerance. I believe he is right.

Darwinists presume that their view of origins is beyond debate. Believers in divine creation are looked upon as dinosaurs, on the same level as members of the Flat Earth Society. For example, I read in a Dutch newspaper that "whoever rejects the theory of evolution places himself outside of intellectual discussion." How arrogant! Daniel Taylor writes about a public university of national stature in the United States, which conducted a conference on the *threat of creationism to public education*, without asking any creationist to speak.

American history Professor George Marsden, speaking to a group of scholars, accused major universities of discriminating against scholarship that reflects religious, especially Christian, perspectives. He commented:

Unless the major universities change, they should add a footnote to the phrase in their catalogues announcing that they "welcome diverse perspectives." It should read: "Except, of course, religious perspectives."

In his book *The Soul of the American University*, Marsden shows that the standards of academia discourage a professor who is teaching, say, the history of Christianity from the position that Christianity may be true. Socialist, feminist and African-American studies are politically correct, while Christianity is politically incorrect. As Marsden wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* (December 22, 1993):

Many contemporary academics insist that the only respectable place for religion in the academy is on the syllabus - as an object of study - where it may be subordinated to Western scientific methods of analysis.

As secularism became more predominant in our culture, it also turned more and more intolerant. In public opinion, the church is considered a symbol of intolerance. The heretics and the infidels are the Christians who refuse to surrender to the modern mindset.

Secularists do not allow a place for a supernatural Creator. This antagonism towards God is demonstrated by a resolution adopted by the Biology Faculty at the San Francisco State University in February, 1994. It declared that "there is no scientific evidence to support the concept of intelligent design," and that therefore, "the intelligent design concept is not scientific."

In Canada the opposition to Christianity in university circles can also be fierce. This was the experience of George Grant. When he defended the British empire in terms of Christian principles, he was told by a professor from Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario: "I don't like people who give up radical politics for the consolation of religion." Grant was shattered; he later declared that they were the most savage words ever spoken to him by an older man he had respected. His biographer commented that it was the first of many bitter lessons of what "might happen should he be too open about his Christianity."

### **Limits to tolerance**

The 1995 Annual Report of the Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC) welcomed the United Nations' decision to declare 1995 the International Year of Tolerance. It commented that it would be hard to imagine any appeal more urgent for Canadians than the call for tolerance. But tolerance in Canada has its limitations. Secular liberalism will tolerate and encourage a variety of views, provided that these are privately held, and have no social or public significance. It tolerates different world views as long as they don't threaten its hold on society. No wonder that the phrase, "liberal

tyranny" has been applied to this intolerant attitude. It intends to keep a stranglehold on the nation. Religious convictions can only function in home and church. But this limitation is not even sufficient for the CHRC. It says that "doctrinal claims for the primacy of some revealed truth" are a manifestation of ethnocentrism, which "every society must be prepared to deal with firmly and directly."

Secularism is the only acceptable faith. It bequeaths tolerance to groups and views which meet its approval. It shows no inclination to tolerate any deviation from the party line. The injustice done to parents who send their children to Christian schools illustrates this fact. In Ontario the public school system has a complete monopoly. A large minority of Ontario citizens are denied their fundamental rights to choose a school system in line with their fundamental faith commitment. This unfair and intolerant situation should be abolished to make room for a plurality of school systems, all fully funded by tax dollars.

The CHRC reports that Canadians believe strongly in the freedom to speak their mind. But it also acknowledges that Canada places limits on absolute freedom of speech. And in reference to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, it says that it "has the unenviable task of representing the public interest in regulating what can be broadcasted to Canadians." For years the CRTC has prevented Christian broadcasting. Its commissioners seem to think that Christians are a danger to society. Only recently one TV station and a few radio stations were given permission to broadcast. The most recent is the Christian Hit Radio Inc. in Ottawa, broadcasting primarily "Christian music from local studios.

But why can't public broadcasting [me be made available to programmers of different faith persuasions? The 1991 broadcasting Act gave women equal opportunity to participate fully in all aspects of the Canadian broadcasting system. The act states that the Canadian broadcasting system should:

through its programming and the employment opportunities arising out of its operations, serve the needs and interests, and reflect the circumstances and aspirations, of Canadian men, women and children, including equal rights.

Why not give equal opportunity to Christians to broadcast their views and establish their own stations? Why not fulfil their aspirations? Why should secularism have the monopoly?

### **Intolerance and missions**

Christians who publicly proclaim their faith and try to implement it in every sphere of life are often treated with disrespect and meet even outright opposition. R. Judson Carlberg, president of Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts, observes that America is no longer relegating Christians and Christian ideas to the margins. A new and more troubled phase has begun - *the culture of disrespect*.

This culture of disrespect puts a heavy burden on the mission task of the church. In secular universities, North American Protestant foreign missionaries are called tools of cultural imperialism. Many Americans and Canadians deny that there is such a thing as absolute truth. The one belief that is not tolerated is that Jesus Christ is the only Saviour, the only Mediator between God and man, and that all people must believe in Him to be saved. Therefore it has become permissible to question and even denounce Biblebelieving Christians who proclaim Christ as the Truth and the only Way to God and who consider other religions wrong. They usually reserve for them the label "fundamentalist." Christian mission outreach is seen as belittling non-Christian religions, which is unacceptable in a multicultural society. There is a widespread perception that spreading the Gospel entails intolerance.

Many claim to see truth in all religions and that all roads lead to the same God. And all leaders of the various religions are said to teach the same ultimate truth. They deny that there is anything unique, normative or superior about Jesus Christ and the Christian faith. Polls show that the majority of Canadians under the age of fifty believe that questioning the truthfulness of another person's religious view is showing intolerance. This means that the increasingly common view is that Christians should never critique another culture or an individual's moral decisions or faith, because all views deserve equal respect as they are equally true.

Even in mainline churches, some leaders believe that evangelism is outmoded and unnecessary in a culturally diverse society. Rather than risk offending a neighbour or a foreign nation, they have allowed their outreach and missionary programs to atrophy. In the name of tolerance many would not dream of "imposing" their views on anyone else. They think of missions in terms of encouraging people to return to their own faith, learning from them through dialogue, and extending practical help to them.

At the annual meeting of Seafarers chaplains from U.S., Canadian and Caribbean ports in New York, September 1994, Kosuke Koyama, professor of ecumenics, a Japanese convert to Christianity, argued that no one faith has a monopoly on God and urged that chaplains encounter people from other cultures in a spirit of discovering what they have to teach us. This is a far cry from the apostle Paul's confession: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (Romans 1:16).

### **The Bible and tolerance**

Our times are remarkably similar to those experienced by the early church in the Roman Empire. Great tolerance was shown towards the multitudes of religions and cults. But when Christians openly confessed the name of the only God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and refused to worship the emperor, tolerance soon turned into persecution. How then should we live in society so intolerant towards the Christian faith?

As I have shown, the modern concept of tolerance is rooted in humanism. The contrast between the humanistic concept of tolerance is not a matter of tolerance opposed to intolerance, but of true tolerance opposed to false tolerance. According to the humanist idea of tolerance, man decides what is right and wrong, and what he may believe. True tolerance does not tolerate everything. It cannot tolerate evil. It aims at honouring God's Word in the church, in the world, and in the life of each believer. Therefore, we neither need to avoid the word intolerance nor to apologize for being intolerant when the occasion warrants it. Christians do not force their views on those who disagreed with them. And they do not want humanist dogma imposed on them. They refuse to withdraw into the safe haven of private faith. They know that they are involved in a war against the spirit of the age (Ephesians 6:12).

The Bible draws a line between those who acknowledge Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord and those who reject God's gracious offer of salvation. It reveals the antithesis between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. And this struggle between good and evil is not only experienced in our private life, but also in the sciences, politics, business, and so on. Christian toleration can never align itself with an "anything goes" mentality. God tells how we ought to live and act.

The LORD calls Himself the one true God (Deuteronomy 6:4). He does not tolerate idolatry (Exodus 20:3). God did not tolerate Baal worship. He required a radical choice: "If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal is God follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). The Lord Jesus did not tolerate the denial of His name. He said, "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven" (Matthew 10:32-33). The early church did not tolerate error. Those who opposed the true Gospel were refuted (Titus 1:9). The apostle Paul told Timothy, "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Timothy 4:2).

## **Conclusion**

Through courageous and faithful mission work, the Gospel spread from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, often facing fierce opposition. Through the intolerance of missionaries and evangelists, who could not stand the thought of millions perishing outside of Christ, sinners turned to the Saviour and churches were established. True tolerance contends "for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). Abraham Kuyper once said:

When principles that run against your deepest convictions begin to win the day, then battle is your calling, and peace has become sin; you must, at the price of dearest peace, lay your convictions bare before friend and enemy, with all the fire of your faith.