



## Do We Value Social Tolerance?

*“... to be tolerant is to be indulgent to the practices and opinions of others in the absence of conclusive evidence and rational consensus.”*

By Marc A. Hight, Ph.D.

One day your child returns home from school, proudly announcing to the family that everyone must tolerate his alternative arithmetical beliefs. “Two plus two equals five,” he proclaims. Should you tolerate such behavior? Is such a case different from teaching your child to tolerate alternative religious and political beliefs? The cases *are* different. The parent who “tolerates” such behavior about math demonstrates confusion about the concept of social tolerance. Here I explore the concept of social tolerance and outline some of the demands a commitment to social tolerance actually places on a free society that values it.

In social contexts, to be tolerant is to be indulgent to the practices and opin-

ions of others *in the absence of conclusive evidence and rational consensus*. The parent who corrects his child for a factual mistake is not intolerant; the concept of tolerance simply *does not apply* to such situations. Social tolerance only applies in contexts where there is both an absence of compelling evidence and an absence of consensus in the general community of rational persons. For many religious and political beliefs, we have neither compelling evidence that one position is correct nor anything approximating consensus in the rational community.

The problem with social tolerance, however, is that many people do not understand that the concept is a principled one. In obvious contrasting cases like arithmetic and religious beliefs, the distinction is easy to see.

Yet precisely the same analysis applies to cases that are likely to make us less comfortable. Consider two additional examples.

(1) A fervent young Christian genuinely believes that God has spoken to him, commanding him to punish 10 sinful young women by crucifying them. (2) A fervent young Muslim genuinely believes that God has spoken to her, telling her that her recent remission while fighting cancer was due to divine intervention. She believes she must share her story to reveal God’s love in the world.

Both examples are logically parallel. An empirically untestable claim is made by appealing to the supernatural. The difference, of course, is that the *consequences* in the first case violate other precepts we think true. Yet note that the reason we do not tolerate cases of the first kind while we do cases like the second has *nothing* to do with the likelihood of each claim to be true. As far as we know, the young man might be right, and we are obstructing the will of God by opposing him. The reason we do not tolerate the young man’s action is because such an action vio-

lates other moral and social principles (often encoded in law) *and* lacks the support of the rational community. The young woman’s claim also fails the test of satisfying a rational consensus. Thus, if there were reason to think that her belief violated a well-established principle and there was rational consensus about the issue, then applying coercive force to constrain her behavior would *not* be intolerant. Social tolerance simply would not apply. It is only because we lack both compelling evidence to resolve the issue *and* lack a consensus in the rational community that the concept applies at all.

Advocating a society that values social tolerance simply does not imply that we must embrace pluralism with respect to every belief or action. You might laugh at the idea of “arithmetic pluralism,” but many people are not laughing when it comes to pluralism about beliefs concerning abortion or euthanasia. A careful application of the concept of social tolerance to these issues provides *clear* directives to civic policy. Consider abortion. Granting that a prohibition against murder is both necessary and backed by a consensus, do we *know* that abortion is murder? We do not. Many able thinkers deny with plausible reasons that the fetus is a person (no one denies that human fetuses are human). As a result, there remain grounds for believing that abortion is not the *murder* of a hu-

man *person*. We allow for many justified killings of humans. Thus, the first requirement for constraining behavior (compelling evidence) is not satisfied. Neither is the second. No rational consensus has emerged about the permissibility of abortion.

But what about those who are convinced that abortion is evil? Why should they allow others to commit what they perceive to be a crime against God? The answer is that our society has elected to value social tolerance in the first place. In the absence of compelling evidence and rational consensus, one should (intellectually and legally) abstain from constraining the behavior of others. Such a view is the foundation of a free society.

Yet the concept cuts more than one way. Consider the example of the evolution-creation debate in this country. Do we have compelling evidence that the Earth is considerably older than Biblical literalists believe and that organisms have undergone a process of natural selection? We do. The main debates in academic circles concern the theory of the *mechanism* of natural selection precisely because the weight of empirical evidence for the fact of evolution is so great. But that only satisfies the first of the requirements for constraining behavior according to the concept of social tolerance. As is well known, we also do not have a clear consensus among persons in the

rational community. Many smart and careful thinkers continue to believe that creationism is plausible if not true. As a result, despite the outrage that my claim may generate in various (especially scientific) communities, we have an obligation *not* to constrain creationist attempts to teach rival theories of the genesis of humanity. In the same vein, we ought not allow creationists to restrict the teaching of the theory of evolution either.

The underlying thought behind having a society that implements the value of social tolerance is that competing claims and beliefs will work themselves out after a long enough course of critical scrutiny. The best way to remove false ideas from the public consciousness is to continue to expose them to the light of explicitly critical attention. And this applies to retaining true propositions as well. Thus the real test of a society with respect to its commitment to truth and plurality is its willingness to jealously defend social tolerance. Just as we are justified in constraining the behavior of those who wish to promote “alternative arithmetic,” we must discipline ourselves to constrain *our own* behavior when it comes to ideas and beliefs that we think false, but that have not yet worked their way through the test of rational scrutiny.

The question that remains is whether we, as a society, *want* to value social tolerance.

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