

Tolerance expresses respect

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To tolerate something is to put up with it though you wish it would go away. Why on Earth, then, would anyone who's not a masochist strive to be tolerant or expect others to tolerate her?

One pretty good reason is that tolerance makes for peaceful living. If I tolerate your stupid ways, you might tolerate mine. We might not like what each other is up to, but my acting against you would take me away from things I'd rather be doing and, worse, it might provoke you to act against me.

Of course, if your ways directly put at risk things about which I care deeply, then I might find it worth my while to come after you despite all the energy it will cost me, and even despite the punishment you might dole out should I not prevail. Keeping the peace is a good reason to be tolerant, then, so long as the people tolerated are either tolerable or powerful. But if what you do is vile and I am stronger than you, good sense counsels me to cease tolerating you and attempt to establish a new peace, one on my terms.

The appeal of the peaceful-living reason for tolerance is close to universal, as most people would rather be getting on with their own projects than fussing and fighting with others, and almost everyone would rather not provoke an enemy who could harm him.

Another reason to value tolerance is that tolerance expresses respect for the personhood of others. The appeal of this reason is far from universal. One has first to care to respect the personhood of others, and historically neither the powerful nor the weak have concerned themselves much with respecting others. People care about their family, their friends, their tribe, or their guild, or about salvation, prosperity, the equal distribution of material goods, science, progress, or the NHL. They serve these values first, then respect second, if at all.

Respect for others consists in recognizing through one's actions that their projects and aspirations matter to them as much as one's own matter to oneself. We can all agree that others are living their lives through their values and by pursuing their ends in just the same way and with just the same passion as one is living one's own life, but only if this matters to one will one be inclined to treat others with respect.

Treating others with respect involves keeping out of their way, even if you don't like their way. To interfere with their projects, to make it difficult for them to realize their aspirations, is to rank your values ahead of theirs simply by virtue of their being your values. To respect others is, instead, to allow them to set and follow their own paths.

Tolerance expresses one's commitment to treat others as equal to oneself in their personhood.

I can think of no reason why a person ought to be concerned to respect others. If my salvation matters more to you than that I live my life as I happen to see best, then you are not

making any sort of mistake by forcing me to live a pious life. Nonetheless, we can be immensely happy for the accidents of history that have made it possible for us to value respect for others. We should also be immensely saddened by current tendencies away from respect for others and tolerance, and toward intolerant means of attaining social justice or whatever good the powerful now favour.

To tolerate the ways of others out of respect for their personhood is to forswear the use of certain means against them, even when one knows that those means are the most effective one has. Means against others that one will not employ include boycotts and other economic pressures, shunning and incivility, and denial of civil liberties, such as freedom of expression, privacy, and freedom of association.

Toleration does not, though, mean keeping quiet. In fact, we express our respect for others when we offer them honest criticism. In discussing and debating identities and values, we indicate that we take each other seriously and hold each other capable of seeing the facts and responding to them.

In honest discussion, we might attempt to change people's beliefs and values, but we do not thereby attempt to manipulate them into those beliefs and values. We give them reasons but leave them free to determine for themselves the soundness of those reasons.

A tolerant society would be one in which the civil liberties have a high standing. No law would codify what is merely a majority or elite preference or taste; laws would address only serious matters of harm. But not only would people be left free by the government to pursue their lives as they wish, so long as they leave others free to do the same. People would also be left unmolested to pursue their experiments in living. Of course, no one would expect her experiments to go uncriticised.

How would tolerant people in a tolerant society approach a matter such as the proposed law school at Trinity Western University? To be a student at Trinity Western, remember, one must sign a covenant not to engage in intimacy outside of marriage or with a partner of the same sex.

People whose tolerance is based in respect would criticise severely this covenant and the policy of having students affirm it. But they would not apply economic, political, or professional pressure against the school. Applying pressures other than those of argument would be to manipulate the institution into change, not to persuade it to change.

Tolerance is difficult, for it ties one's hands behind one's back in the face of the ugly, the stupid, the wasteful, and even the intolerant. Tolerance constrains one to use only one's wits in promoting one's values. Yet anyone who respects others as equal persons will cheerfully accept that difficulty.