The Abuse of Toleration

Toleration is not a Christian virtue, but it is a positive good that merits the support of civil society. Strong advocacy for toleration began during the Protestant Reformation when the doctrinal disputes among Christian denominations led to vicious persecutions and religious warfare. Figures like John Locke recommended that Christians live in peace with each other despite differences over doctrine. The toleration of error was preferable to dissension and hatred. The defenders of toleration also believed that each person should be free to affirm only what he truly believes. No one should be compelled to assent to what he thinks is false. But toleration is not relativism. To tolerate is not to agree with what one believes to be in error. Neither does it require a blanket denial of objective truth. A tolerant person judges that others hold erroneous views but chooses to live with them peaceably. The tolerant hope for agreement in the future.

Toleration is attractive to Christians, who are called to forgo harsh judgments and to show compassion toward others. Are we not obliged to overlook others' faults? Yes, that is true, but the relativist wants others to show respect for what is not true. That is quite different. This demand does not derive from the virtue of toleration but from the desire to gain an advantage. Once respect for falsehood is granted, the relativist uses force to compel conformity. Those who are tolerant, in contrast, do not use force to compel. They live with differences. Moreover, they recognize that the application of force is a violation of conscience, which the virtue of toleration seeks to prevent. Neither does the relativist hold out any hope for arriving at possible future agreements. Christians should be on guard against appeals to toleration because they are often rhetorical strategies designed to gain a foothold that can later be used against them.

One common tactic is to misinterpret Matthew 7, where Jesus tells his followers not to judge. "For as you judge, so will you be judged, and the measure with which you measure will be measured out to you." This is a reformulation of the Golden Rule. We should treat others as we would like to be treated, which also means that we must judge ourselves as we judge others. If my judgment of you is harsh or unfair, then I should expect others to judge me in a similar manner. This does not mean, however, that we should avoid making judgments altogether, as if we were to abandon our conscience. We must always be careful to distinguish between good and evil, and this involves judgments concerning both ourselves and others. Christ did not come to set aside the Ten Commandments, but to complete and perfect them. The commandments are a summary of the natural law whose general governing principle is that we should pursue what is good and avoid what is evil. We cannot follow this rule unless we make judgments.

What Jesus opposes in Matthew 7 is hypocrisy. We must take the plank out of our own eye before noticing the speck in others'. But avoiding hypocritical judgments does not mean

shutting down our natural ability to distinguish right and wrong. There is nothing hypocritical in stating that a thief, an adulterer, or a murderer does what is wrong. Neither is it hypocritical to state that homosexual marriage is contrary to the order of nature. This is instead an observation of the centrality of sexual union to the married state. Neither is it immoral to fault those who destroy healthy organs through "gender affirming therapy." Jesus did not oppose judgments, even harsh ones, if they were true. He did not hesitate, for example, to call the Pharisees whitewashed tombs. Neither did he ask us to forgive those who have not hurt us but have hurt others. Only those who have suffered injury can grant pardon. I have no power to grant forgiveness to someone who has injured you.

Given his influence, St. Paul is sometimes called the second founder of Christianity. His travels are recorded by St. Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, which is followed by his letters. He was certainly not afraid to judge. In his letter to the Romans, he says: "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good" (12:9). Hate is a very strong word, but he uses it. In philosophical terms, what is hated cannot be made an object of love because the two are opposites. Evil actions are an appropriate object of our hatred. We *should* hate what is evil. Of course, we must distinguish between the sin and the sinner, but indifference to wrongdoing is a serious mistake because it allows serious harms to continue, thus permitting further suffering and making it possible for additional others to be hurt. Here are some actions that are proper objects of hated: murder, rape, incest, violence, cruelty, treason, betrayal, and similar wrongs. We certainly should not approach such things with indifference. Strong contempt for evil is necessary to motivate the concerted action needed for its prevention and elimination.

The claim that Jesus taught us not to make judgments is an effective tool of relativists against Christians and causes some to foolishly tolerate evil. The phrase, "Do not judge, lest ye be judged," is quoted as if it were divine support for the philosophy of relativism. Who are you to make judgments? I thought you were a Christian. Have you not heard that Jesus tells us not to judge others? Presumably, the true Christian is one who passes through life without differentiating between right and wrong, good and evil, or virtue and vice. Perhaps he is permitted to judge his own actions, but judgments about others are forbidden. Thus, the teachings of Jesus are made to fit the cramped views of the modern relativist. And how is it that the relativist has acquired the authority to interpret Christianity for Christians? He rejects objective truth, and this includes Truth Itself. In his condemnation of Christians for making judgments about homosexual marriage, transgender surgery, abortion, and other moral evils, the relativist judges others and contradicts his own assertions about Christ's teaching.

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