

Findings



Dedicated to the
Preservation of the Family

Intolerant Tolerance

The Weapon of Moral Relativism

By Stephen Daniels



Early one Monday morning an assembly of elementary school students met together to enjoy a theatrical presentation being performed at their school. Later on, it

became clear to many parents that the assembly their children had attended was not about academics or entertainment but was about teaching values to their children that were contradictory to their own. The play entitled “Cootie Shots: Theatrical Inoculations Against Bigotry for Kids, Parents and Teachers” was presented as a way to teach kids to avoid prejudice against other people. However, it was later discovered that the play was not just a lesson on how to get along with other people—it also taught the kids to be accepting of the homosexual lifestyle.¹ For many parents, this was an affront to the values and beliefs they were trying to instill in their children. But for the promoters of the play, this was simply a way to teach children the importance of being tolerant of others. How could promoting tolerance be objectionable to parents who want to teach their children traditional values? And why is this tolerance contradictory to so many people’s values and beliefs? The answer lies behind the cause and effect of the tolerance that is being touted in today’s society.

In the world of public policy, the debate over how best to address the important issues of the day has always involved competing points of view. It can be seen in the wrangling of elected members of a state legislature, a political debate between competing candidates, the dissenting opinion of an associate judge, and even a simple conversation between two neighbors at the backyard fence. The free exchange of ideas has always characterized America’s public debate.

This free exchange of ideas has also been accompanied by the understanding that in a country where freedom of speech is cherished, people on any side of an issue have the right to express their views. This underlying principle has meant that even where there is disagreement, there can still be tolerance for what other people think.

Unfortunately, in today’s culture the traditional understanding of tolerance has been redefined such that the advocates of a new morality are shutting out those who support traditional family values. It is

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occurring mainly where laws that are based on traditional moral principles run contrary to the desires of those pushing a new morality. This is happening even to the degree that viewpoints considered mainstream 20 to 30 years ago are being characterized as divisive and intolerant today.

This paper will explore the differences between the traditional understanding of tolerance (referred to here as the “old tolerance”) with the newly evolving definition (referred to here as the “new tolerance”). It will also explain how damaging this new shift can be to the honest debate of social issues in our culture and who stands to lose the most from this change.

This discussion of tolerance is just one portion of a larger issue confronting today’s culture—moral relativism. Moral relativism

is the belief that there are no absolutes, that truth is relative to each individual person and that all values are equal. The effects of moral relativism have manifested themselves in other ways including multiculturalism and postmodern thinking. However, the current emphasis on tolerance in so many areas of public debate has increasingly become the new way to marginalize those who disagree with this modern way of thinking.

The Old Tolerance

In order to understand how tolerance has evolved in today’s culture, it is important to establish what it has traditionally been understood to mean. According to the New Webster’s Dictionary, tolerance is defined as “a readiness to allow others to believe or act as they judge best.”² Stated another way, the old tolerance allows people who don’t agree on beliefs or values to coexist peacefully in their mutual disagreement.

The key element of the old tolerance is the ability of opposing sides to abide what each other is saying, even if they are categorically opposed to it. Tolerance, in this sense, does not mean to accept the other side’s point of view, nor does it require a surrendering of one’s own views. The old tolerance does not even assume that all viewpoints have an equal legitimacy. It simply acknowledges that each side has the right to its own views.

This old tolerance has long been an accepted part of human relationships and it has also been a recognized part of the American discussion of social issues—at least until recently. One of the laudable strengths of American society has been the freedom for individuals and groups to express their differing viewpoints in the marketplace of ideas. In America, this freedom comes from the nation’s foundations in liberty which are grounded in law and a clear sense of right and wrong. Along

with the ideas of representative government and separation of powers came the foundational guarantee of freedom of speech. This freedom set the stage for American political and social debate that would span centuries.

The old tolerance provides a framework for debate and the exercise of First Amendment rights. People can speak their minds as long as the old tolerance is in place because the old tolerance allows everyone to participate equally in the important discussions of the day. Unfortunately, things are changing.

The New Tolerance

Today, there is a new understanding of tolerance—one that is far different from the traditionally recognized definition and one that has dangerous consequences. Unlike the old tolerance which requires nothing but to simply acknowledge another's right to a different opinion, the new tolerance requires that all viewpoints be promoted as valid and equal, as long as one does not make moral judgements about anyone else's views. As a result, every viewpoint is considered to have the same moral equivalency and to be equally valid unless it infringes on another's point of view.³

The new tolerance requires that no viewpoint can claim superiority over any other. To speak out in opposition to another view is now considered "intolerant." The new tolerance requires the active acceptance of the other side without question, but it does not stop at acceptance. By advocating this type of equality, the new tolerance also requires that every viewpoint be promoted equally, except for those that are considered intolerant. And intolerant views are those based on moral absolutes.⁴ In fact, author Josh McDowell points out that the new tolerance is stretching beyond just equality of beliefs. For example, he points out that at one time homosexuals were simply seeking permission from society to live out their lifestyle in peace. Today it's not only permission that they want, but praise too. He states that advocates of the new tolerance will say "we not only want permission but demand your praise and if you do not give us praise—you're intolerant."⁵

It is when the new tolerance raises all points of view to a level of equality that it becomes problematic. By considering every viewpoint equal and legitimate, the new tolerance discards any measure of absolute moral truth—the belief that right and wrong are clearly defined—and replaces it with moral relativism.⁶ Now the principle is "what's right for you, may not be what's right for me." So anyone who holds to an absolute truth and claims that it applies to

everyone, violates this principle, and by doing so, can be denounced as intolerant. In effect, the new tolerance is used to silence any voice that speaks out against a moral wrong by removing any standard by which to judge what is right.

Tolerance has evolved from a passive attitude to an active acceptance of certain points of view. The unacceptable points of view to those that advocate tolerance are those held by anyone who opposes their view. So despite claiming equality as its goal, the new tolerance actually marginalizes those who support traditional positions on any issue. It is used selectively by moral relativists against those who uphold absolute moral truth particularly on issues such as homosexuality, abortion and religion.

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The Effect of the New Tolerance

The new tolerance is not simply a philosophical abstract that is being postulated in the halls of academic institutions, it is the worldview being pushed on society. And with this ideology gaining a foothold, there have been measurable changes in the way beliefs and values are treated in the marketplace of ideas.

Very often, the new tolerance serves to censor the voices of those who become afraid to express their values and beliefs for fear of being labeled intolerant. This fear can squelch the voices of many who would normally speak out on moral issues.

The new tolerance also lures those who do not have deeply held beliefs because of the natural appeal of its claims. Buzz words like "equality," "diversity" and "respect" convince people that the new tolerance is what is right. Also, the desire to avoid being labeled intolerant can be a strong incentive to follow along. Unfortunately, many of the people who adopt the new tolerance have not taken the time to consider its effects.

With all of this in mind, the new tolerance has no easy answer to how is it possible to make a value judgement when no value is considered better or worse than any other. Ironically, when advocates of the new tolerance hold themselves to their own standard—that all viewpoints are equally valid—they immediately contradict themselves because their accusations of intolerance are by their own definition intolerant. In reality, the new tolerance has nothing to do with advancing equality, but it does attempt to silence those who speak out for traditional moral truth. Therefore, despite claiming to work in the interest of equality and justice for all, the new tolerance actually does the opposite. It creates its own hierarchy of acceptable beliefs and rejects those that do not conform to it.

New Tolerance in North Carolina

Anyone who speaks out against the behaviors and/or lifestyles of others faces being labeled "intolerant." Witness the outcry of "intolerance" by homosexual activists toward anyone who opposes the legitimization of their behavior. Though the rhetoric of the homosexual rights movement is usually the celebration of tolerance and diversity, homosexuals have been quick to try to suppress any voices of dissent, thus expressing the new tolerance. This approach was clearly seen in the campaign to shut down the "Dr. Laura Show," a television program featuring radio psychologist Dr. Laura Schlessinger. Homosexual activists, outraged by her comments in opposition to homosexuality, launched a nationwide campaign⁷ to silence the television program. After a short time, they had successfully rallied to have the program taken off the air.⁸

The push for new tolerance from homosexual activists is not always as blatant as the example cited above. In 2002, a study was commissioned by the provost at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to find ways to create a more accepting climate on campus for the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer identified) community. Among the 83 recommendations in the 92 page document was a call for a more "open and tolerant" university. According to the study, "absolutely any effort to improve the overall climate for LGBTQ individuals at *UNC-Chapel Hill* must be fundamentally grounded in the intellectual life of the University, for one of the most effective ways to combat intolerance and discrimination against sexual minorities is through education."⁹ Among other things, the report recommends creating institutional support at *UNC-Chapel Hill* for homosexuals and

implementing curricula that would expand the study and discussion of homosexuality.¹⁰ According to this report, the best way to fight intolerance on campus is to get the publicly funded university to “educate” its students on the homosexual culture. This is despite the fact that sodomy remains a felony offense in North Carolina law¹¹ and that a large majority of North Carolinians do not condone this activity.

The new tolerance also emerges in the area of sex education. In addition to teaching kids how to use contraceptives and where to get them, advocates for comprehensive sex education, like those who changed the curriculum in Wake County, are also inserting lessons about tolerance in sex education curriculum. School officials defend this as simply a way to teach students to “practice tolerance and embrace differences”¹² so that students are not harassed or bullied. However, the curriculum effectively teaches the acceptance of the homosexual lifestyle by labeling any opposition to homosexuality as “prejudice.” School sanctioned promotion of tolerating homosexual behavior is certainly not tolerant of those students who believe that homosexuality is immoral.

The tolerance rhetoric even extends to the religious community where the effort to spread religious belief are now considered divisive and intolerant of other faiths. This is especially evident in attitudes toward evangelical Christians. For Christians, the responsibility to share one’s faith with nonbelievers is one of the foundational teachings of Jesus Christ. Believers are commanded to “go therefore and make disciples of all the nations.”¹³ To Christians this commandment is not optional, but is an important part of obedience to God. However, in an increasingly pluralistic society, the response to such action has steadily become more hostile. For example, while commenting on a Southern Baptist Convention’s campaign to evangelize people of other faiths, former Clinton White House spokesman Joe Lockhart commented, “I think the president has made very clear ... his views on religious tolerance, and how one of the greatest challenges going into the next century is dealing with intolerance, dealing with ethnic and religious hatred, and coming to grips with the long-held resentments between religions.” He went on to say, “so I think he’s been very clear in his opposition to whatever organization, including the Southern Baptist, that perpetuate ancient religious hatred.”¹⁴ Equating evangelism (especially the kind inspired out of concern for others)

with perpetuating religious hatred is far removed from the old tolerance.

As the new tolerance becomes more and more acceptable, it will become increasingly difficult for people who claim moral absolutes to spread their message. The Bible has other absolute statements such as God’s command to “have no other gods before me”¹⁵ and Jesus saying “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”¹⁶ Each of the verses found in Scripture have significant meaning to Christians and are foundational to their faith. However, in order to conform to the new tolerance, these believers would have to stay silent about what the Bible says.

This reality is not only true for pro-family advocates and evangelical Christians, but for anyone whose religious or political beliefs take an absolute moral stand such as orthodox Jews and Muslims.

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Support for values that have enjoyed mainstream support for centuries such as the sanctity of marriage and the value of life are now being marginalized by a mindset that is spreading across nation and world. Clearly, those who stand to lose the most are advocates of traditional values who take a stand against immorality or who try to share their faith with people of other religions.

Examples of the New Tolerance

The number of examples where the new tolerance is displayed is increasing rapidly. Here are a few more examples in addition to those previously mentioned.

- A student group that opposed abortion, euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide was denied official recognition by the Student Bar Association at Washington University because of concerns that the group was “too narrowly focused.” More specifically, the panel, which rejected the group by a two-to-one margin, objected to the absence of a position against the death penalty.¹⁷ To qualify for recognition, the group was told it must not approach the

issues from the pro-life side alone and must open its membership to students who disagree with their viewpoint.¹⁸

- A 23-year employee of a major corporation was fired after refusing to admit wrongdoing when he objected to materials about an upcoming “Coming Out Day” sponsored by a homosexual activist group. Despite the company’s claim of diversity, the employee’s actions were deemed out of line with company values and therefore not acceptable.¹⁹
- The nation’s largest gay newspaper, *The Washington Blade*, rejected an advertisement for an event aimed at helping homosexuals come out of their lifestyle claiming that company policy required that any ads from “anti-gay” businesses be rejected immediately.²⁰
- A Christian liberal arts college for home schoolers was denied accreditation because it teaches its students creationism in biology class. In a letter to the college, the accreditation organization stated that such teachings did not satisfy their academic requirements and limited “liberty of thought and freedom of speech.”²¹

When Intolerance is Good

Despite the current promotion of tolerance, there is a legitimate place for intolerance in society when it is directed toward things that are wrong. People discriminate between the good and the bad all the time. Stealing and murder are still considered wrong behavior, and the criminal justice system will show intolerance toward anyone who commits these crimes by punishing them under the law. The same could be said for school systems that are intolerant of bullying among students. Even the common shopper would be intolerant of being overcharged for a purchase. When applied to everyday experience, it becomes clear that intolerance is good when used to prevent or oppose unacceptable behavior.

In reality, intolerance can be helpful because it can bring out what needs to be looked at more carefully. Intolerance can force social debate on important issues. Most of all, intolerance is helpful in pointing out moral injustice. The intolerance displayed during the civil rights marches of the 1960s inspired a national debate which led to widespread changes in racial equality. Few would consider this intolerance to have been misguided. The same could be said for the early colony’s intolerance for British oppression. By standing up for the freedom

of the people, the founding fathers formed a nation that would become the true haven for liberty.

When advocates for the new tolerance extol its virtues, they consider it to be an act of justice. However, they are not intellectually honest in their claims. Those who hold to the traditional (old) tolerance make genuine claims about what they believe. Cultural conservatives do not disguise their intolerance for certain things, and cite their deeply held values and beliefs as the reason for it. Conversely, cultural liberals who push for the new tolerance say that they want equal acceptance for all views, but only if the moralists remain quiet. The reality is that intolerance for what is wrong is very appropriate in a country that has a basis for moral law and justice and has long upheld the freedom to speak out for what is right.

How Can the Law Stand?

If the new tolerance is permitted to gain further acceptance, there will be serious ramifications in society, especially in the area of law. Consider what the long term effects on the law will be if all views are given equal standing. Inevitably those ideas that are not in the best interest of the public good will gain acceptance. Under the new tolerance, who is to say that any idea is wrong? By definition, legal standards are intolerant of certain acts because they draw a clear line between right and wrong. However, if the line between what is right and wrong continues to be erased, who then will differentiate between the two?

It is only when there is an absolute standard of moral truth on which to base right and wrong that the law can be properly crafted and applied. And this moral standard must be derived from the same traditional values that have undergirded society since the founding of this country—not the popular whims of the day.²² Attempts to change the law based on the opinions of those who espouse the new tolerance will mean the exclusion of the voices who stand ready to uphold these traditional values.

Conclusion

The new tolerance is a cultural evolution that can no longer be ignored. Today, it is unacceptable to claim to have absolute truth on one's side and to speak out against the

moral wrongs of the day. And in the public debate over culture and public policy the repercussions are being felt more than ever. But the effects go deeper than just political debate on the issues. The new tolerance is further evidence of the ever increasing presence of moral relativism in today's society. And with that increase comes the further marginalization of those who hold traditional values and beliefs and people of faith. The effects of the new tolerance are more dangerous than they may appear. As those effects are increasingly felt, the battle for traditional values will grow more difficult.

In his farewell speech on September 19, 1796, George Washington said:

"Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great Pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Men and Citizens."²³

President Washington recognized the value of morality in culture and understood that those who try to remove it would be undermining the very underpinnings that make society great. The same is true today. Without morality, the foundations of our liberty will crumble, because there will be no moral compass differentiating between right and wrong. It is up to those who know the truth to proclaim it so that the new tolerance and the moral relativism that it supports will collapse under its own contradictions.

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Endnotes

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