

The New Tolerance and Moral Relativism

by Jay Wegter

Introduction: The political left controls culture (the media, entertainment, education, and politics). The new tolerance is a cultural force, not an intellectual force (D. A. Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance*, p. 104).

I. Why is the new tolerance inherently intolerant? The new tolerance suggests that actually tolerating another person's position means believing that person's position to be at least as true as your own. This is a shift from accepting the existence of different views to acceptance of different views themselves. The new tolerance says or asserts that all beliefs and truth claims are equally valid. Contemporary tolerance is intrinsically intolerant (Ibid, pp. 3-4). (True tolerance means tolerating another person whose views you are convinced are dead wrong.)

A. The three pillars of the old tolerance. There are three assumptions in the old or historic view of tolerance. **Number one**, there is objective truth out there, and it is our duty to pursue the truth. **Number two**, the various parties in a dispute think they know what the truth of the matter is, even though they disagree sharply, each thinking the other wrong. **Number three**, nevertheless, they hold to the best chance of uncovering the truth of the matter, or of persuading people to reason is the unhindered exchange of ideas (and we might add, and no matter who is offended) (Ibid, pp. 6-7).

B. The new tolerance by definition: The new tolerance argues there is no one view that is exclusively true. Strong opinions are nothing more than strong preferences for a particular version of reality, each version is particularly true (Ibid, p. 11). The United Nations Declaration of Principles of Tolerance in 1995 asserts: "Tolerance involves the rejection of dogmatism and absolutism." Does this mean that we have no right to hold conflicting things to be dogmatically true? The national Lambda Chi Alpha position says, "The definition of the new tolerance is that every individual's beliefs, lifestyle, and perception of truth claims are equal. There is no hierarchy of truth, your beliefs and my beliefs are equal and all truth is relative." If you structure your life around this, liberty is lost (Carson) (Jn 8:32) (Ibid, p. 12).

C. The contrast between historic and the new tolerance: The historic understanding of tolerance assumed the connection between tolerance and our understanding of natural law, or what is sometimes called public moral law. The new tolerance has been made to trump natural law and its resultant vision of moral order based on human nature (note *teleology*). The result is that tolerance itself is distorted. Historically, within that framework of a social moral vision, tolerance is seen as a virtue because of its concern for the common good. But, once tolerance is cut loose from this larger moral vision and becomes shackled to the notion of individual freedom to do what one pleases, absent from much consideration of the common good it becomes quite a different sort of beast (Ibid, pp. 48-49).

D. The new tolerance functions as the supreme moral virtue. What we are seeing today is the elevation of this new tolerance to the supreme position in the hierarchy of moral virtues. The supreme sin now is intolerance but that has taken on a new definition. Intolerance today is no longer a refusal to allow contrary opinions in public, but is understood as questioning or contradicting the view that all opinions are equal in value and that all worldviews have equal worth and that all stances are valid. To question such postmodern axioms is by definition intolerant (Ibid.).

The new tolerance poses as the new ultimate virtue; and as yet ‘value free’ (thus against those with dogmatic moral values). The new ultimate virtue is to say that no ideologies are ultimate or mutually exclusive. The new tolerance has become the dominant religion among media leaders. Note the current social issues such as premarital, extramarital sex, abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia. Speak against these and you are considered bigoted, out of date, even dangerous and certainly intolerant (Note why same-sex marriage is used as a ‘test case’ to determine if you are a ‘tolerant’ person.) (Ibid, p. 35).

E. Is the new tolerance virtuous? The arrogance of the new tolerance: it is cut free from truth and morality; yet claims to be the arbiter of both! The new tolerance is cut free from a clear articulation of truth and from binding moral standards. Yet it claims to be the arbiter of both! We ought to expose the false moral high ground of the new tolerance. If one denies the existence of objective evil, it kills both righteous indignation and the will to oppose evil and the suffering it produces. The consequences of atheistic systems enforced by sinful beings with total power is that the powerful define morality and enforce it with the barrel of a gun (Ibid, pp. 128-129).

II. The issue in the new tolerance is not about substance; but that no one should be offended. Today’s political correctness suggests that it’s not a matter of being intolerant of substance, but of intolerance itself. They believe that intolerance is wrong because no one deserves to be offended (Ibid, p. 13). So absurd is the agenda of the new tolerance that in one region of the U. K. a law was passed to remove all images of pigs from public places so as not to offend Muslims. The ban extended to images of Winnie the Pooh’s ‘Piglet’ character (Ibid. p. 24).

A. The old tolerance draws its limits on the basis of substantive arguments about truth, goodness, doing harm, protecting society and its victims, while the new tolerance draws its limits on the basis of what it judges to be intolerant, which has become the supreme vice. Consider that this issue of the new tolerance is a vision of what produces harmony, unity, and oneness. Where do our rights come from? If from the state, it will ultimately take upon itself to mandate (coerce) its vision for unity (Ibid, pp. 14, 17).

Is open-mindedness equivalent to making no judgments? “You’re so judgmental” has become a major league putdown in America, “as if being judgmental of garbage in our culture is a bad thing.” G. K. Chesterton said “The purpose of an open mind is the same as that of an open mouth—to close it again on something solid.” If open-mindedness is being defined as a refusal to make judgments about religious truth and sexual ethics, then we are prone to contracting a form of intellectual lockjaw (Ibid, p. 31).

B. The new tolerance requires the opposite of the older tolerance, the new requiring you take NO ethical stand! The older tolerance calls for you to take an ethical stand, this is true tolerance. True tolerance requires you take a stand among competing truth and ethical claims. Otherwise you are not in a position to tolerate something with which you disagree. Both the old and the new tolerance constitute a social response, not an intellectual position. The new tolerance is radical, a social commitment to treat all ideas and people as equally right except for the people who disagree of this new view of tolerance. Those who uphold the older tolerance are written off as intolerant (banished, not deserving a voice) (Ibid, p. 98).

III. The new tolerance: a move from common moral vision to ‘self-ism’. To say the least we have moved from a common moral vision to individual freedom. The new tolerance is tied to individuality (assumed autonomy of the individual as the view of reality) (Ibid, p. 50). (Note the ascendancy of magazine titles published: *Life, People, Us, Self*—finally deciding it is about “me.”)

A. Historically tolerance issues were worked out within the worldview of biblical theism until the 19th C. Until the early part of the 19th century the vast majority of the Western world presupposed the existence of God. That meant that questions about tolerance were worked out within the framework of what people thought about God. But at the end of the 19th century a switch was flipped, people no longer viewed God as immediately relevant to all the questions raised in the public square. Questions about tolerance and intolerance had to be worked out within non-theistic grids where secularization exercised control. Secular agendas (secular creeds) produced holocausts under Mao and Stalin (Ibid, pp. 71-71).

B. How did we get to the point where those with an exclusive truth claim are regarded as intolerant? The charge that those who claim to know the truth are more intolerant than others can be disputed. We contest that, for those who claim the moral high ground of the new tolerance are in fact no less opinionated than those they criticize. Public universities claim “secularism is toleration” and consider conservatism as pathogenic (i.e. human rights are from God, society best flourishes under God and His transcendent moral code). The new tolerance postures as intrinsically neutral, free from all ethical, moral, and religious systems of thought. At the same time insisting all others are intolerant people. At Harvard, they now tell us it is a **heresy** to suggest the superiority of some value, and **fantasy** to believe in moral argument, and **slavery** to submit to a judgment sounder than your own (Ibid, pp. 94, 96-97).

C. The fact/value split is unquestioned by millions; thus truth and error are considered matters of opinion. Countless millions of people find it difficult, at least on some subjects, to think in terms of mutually exclusive truth and error. Much prefer to think in differences of opinion, or various perspectives. Postmodernism, diversification of population, empirical pluralism has broadened diversity of cultures and in a virtual world we imagine we can create our own realities. All this conspires to push questions of truth to the margins while magnifying the importance of tolerance (Ibid, pp. 73-74).

J. D. Charles says “the culture of tolerance in which we presently find ourselves is a culture in which people believe nothing, possess no clear concept of right and wrong, and are remarkably indifferent to this precarious state of affairs. As a result, tolerance becomes indistinguishable from an intractably intolerant relativism” (Ibid, pp. 75-76).

D. Absolute truth claims (absolutism) and true tolerance are actually friends. But, the new tolerance has twisted this through clever re-definition—claiming that tolerant societies hold to non-dogmatic definitions of truth. The new tolerance believes a myth that the most tolerant society holds to flexible non-dogmatic notions of truth and intolerant societies hold to inflexible truths (Ibid, p. 100).

IV. A formula for tyranny: the new tolerance equates absolute truth claims

(absolutism/orthodoxy) with hate. The new tolerance asserts that religious orthodoxy is narrow, bigoted and hate-filled (since doctrine divides, orthodoxy represents intolerance) (Ibid, p. 115).

A. Why does relativism ultimately give rise to tyranny? The absence of objective standards makes the oppressiveness of the culture possible. This occurred under Marxism and Fascism. Moral fortitude (and its will to be free) disappears if we systematically lose the category of objective truth (Ibid, pp. 124-126).

Tolerance without convictions equals no tolerance. Tolerance with convictions equals real tolerance. Attempts at harmony without convictions prove narcissistic. We must learn from history that when religion is removed from the public arena, the secular creeds of the 20th century were used to justify holocausts. Yet proponents of the new tolerance fear that truth (religious truth claims) will become

totalitarian. Lest we forget, our Savior's exclusive truth claims cancels all other soteriologies.

Why is the new tolerance the height of practical atheism? God's existence establishes the reality and know-ability of truth. Relativism promises freedom, but enslaves people because it refuses to acknowledge good and evil the way the Bible does. Therefore it never adequately confronts sin and evil, thus leaving people enslaved by sin and evil. This opens the door to tyranny. The result is either the chaos of anarchy or the cry for more laws for stability—ultimately a call for a dictator (Ibid, pp. 132-133).

B. The new tolerance shouts down moral dialogue because of its agenda of maximum sexual 'freedom' (2 Pet 2:18-19). The new tolerance has an agenda of maximum sexual 'freedom'; therefore its proponents want to kill all moral dialogue as 'intolerant'. Truth and morality are tied together; homosexuality is wrong because God has given truth about how His image bearers are to behave.

The new tolerance is a path to dystopia, not utopia. The new tolerance is becoming more shrill—zealously tamping down all moral dialogue—the question of moral truth is eliminated, now it is “who may be offended by what you are saying?” Right and wrong are out of the picture. Sexual relations are increasingly trivialized ('hook up' culture)—this trivializing is joined to the devaluation of the life of the unborn (all of this is called 'toleration'). At the same time there is pressure to privatize religion—prohibit proselytizing, and keep religion and moral truth out of the public square (Ibid, pp. 127, 138-139; 144-147).

C. Why does the new tolerance support relativism? In the mind of many observers, the new tolerance rushes in to support moral relativism because of its independent status, this new tolerance becomes ironically a moralizing support of moral relativism.

The pressure to privatize exclusive truth claims is a new development? Where the old tolerance allowed hard differences on religion and morality to compete freely in the public square, the new variety wishes to lock them all indoors as matters of private judgment. The public square must be given over to indistinctness—to moral ambiguity.

The new tolerance is anti-value—hostile to exclusive truth claims. Thus it is not a real value; it is anti-value. It is a disposition of hostility to any suggestion that one thing is better than another. Thus, it kills all hard edge doctrine and exclusive truth claims, demanding they be privatized (Ibid, pp. 76-77).

V. Why does the new tolerance pave the way for government repression and coercion? The new tolerance is a formula for oppression: the new tolerance means that the government must be intolerant of those who do not accept the new definition of tolerance. Under the new tolerance an exclusive belief makes you a radical (Ibid, p. 38).

A. Should Christians withdraw from the marketplace of ideas in the interest of tolerance? That is what is being suggested. The gentle lamb of toleration has returned as the wolf of relativism. The new tolerance has become enforced relativism. Christian truth claims are seen as intolerant in our universities. The new tolerance on college campuses pressures Christians to silence their exclusive truth claims or withdraw from speaking formally and publicly. The new tolerance is waging a new war against proselytizing (evangelism) (Ibid, pp. 33-34, 44-45).

One of the new tolerance's justifications for tamping down exclusivist truth claims is the use of fear mongering, saying that exclusive truth claims will lead to totalitarian coercion. The new tolerance wants the gospel sacrificed to the goddess of relativism. The new tolerance exerts pressure to compromise our exclusive gospel and sacrifice it on the altar on the great goddess of relativism. The

notion that all perspectives are equally valid is radical practical atheism. For it denies the truth that only divine omniscience can escape the narrow limitations of human perspective (Ibid, pp. 46, 110-111).

B. The first amendment has been hijacked for the secular agenda. Yes, religion does not have the right to control the state, nor can the state establish or prohibit religion. Then in a mighty leap, many have inferred religion does not have the right to influence any decisions of the state and therefore we conclude that religion must be restricted to a small and privatized world, or the great barrier between church and state is jeopardized (Ibid, pp. 66-67).

C. The new tolerance is seeking to remove religious reason/moral truth from the public marketplace. The default worldview of the new tolerance is philosophic naturalism. The new tolerance agenda is to remove religious reason (moral truths) from the public marketplace (keep it privatized). The metaphysical commitment to naturalistic secularism is resulting in an increasing restriction upon religious freedom. If human rights come from the state and not from God, then we have no basis to challenge government when it becomes repressive (Ibid, pp. 148-149).

Note the current lie that Jesus is infinitely tolerant (see Christ as Judge in Jn 5; Rom 2; Acts 17; Rev 14; 19; 21; etc.) (Ibid, p. 102). “Judge not” does not mean abandon moral discernment, the Sermon on the Mount is full of moral distinctions. Jesus’ messages are filled with exclusive truth claims, He’s the only way to God; He’s the primary speaker about Hell. Jesus is clear on exclusivism: “not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord” (Matt 7:21-23) (Ibid, p. 103, 105, 118-119).

D. Democracy cannot enshrine freedom if it is not tied to a transcendent moral code. Our source of human rights has everything to do with our right to challenge government. For the great question is: “whose transcendent vision will hold the state in check?” The secular project is making people utterly blind to the fundamental role of religious freedom. Religious freedom is not merely the first freedom; but in its foundational power, it is the foundational freedom for a free society (Ibid, pp. 150-151).

Proponents of the new tolerance naively assume that democracy is a neutral political device that is not tied to a commitment to external absolutes (such as natural law, the Bible, or ecclesiastical tradition) (Ibid, pp. 152-153). What does God’s authority have to do with an effective democracy? “People under God” make democracy work, why? If it is true that right and wrong exist independent of the government (independent of what government says), and there is a final judgment day in which each person shall give a moral account, and there is a robust understanding of the existence of evil and idolatry, THEN, it will generate more humility and greater concern to limit how much power is vested in any person or institution. The loss of moral vision always means an increasingly intrusive government (man must be controlled, and his conscience educated by God’s infallible Word if we are to be effective at self-government; we are back again to the Bible or the bayonet). State agendas become coercive when a nation’s citizens distance themselves from questions of truth and morality. “Whose code or vision should order society?” (Ibid, pp. 158-159).

VI. Solutions in countering the new tolerance:

- 1.) *Expose* its radical moral bankruptcy (Ibid, p. 161).
- 2.) *Maintain* a clear distinction between the two tolerances (old and new) (Ibid.).

3.) **Preserve** a place for truth by distinguishing between a tolerant mind and a tolerant spirit. The latter is desirable, but the former is prohibited by Scripture. God commands believers to use their minds to discern truth from error—to press the antithesis between light and darkness (Ibid, pp. 163-164).

4.) **Expose** the condescending arrogance of the new tolerance. The new tolerance postures as if it possesses the moral high ground (all while denying the existence of absolute, transcendent, moral truth) Challenge this stance, “By what transcendent standard is the relativism in the new tolerance a moral virtue? (Ibid, pp. 165-166).

5.) **Insist** that the new tolerance is not progress. The end of the 19th C. was marked by horse and buggy, disease, low technology. But the 20th C. ushered in an explosive world of modernity and invention and with that progress, the greatest century of bloodshed in human history. The greatest danger of an endlessly progressive view of history is the toxic combination of arrogance and self-delusion (as if our thinking is the most mature, informed, advanced, and balanced of any time in history. In the process, we lose any grasp of the doctrine of sin and its effects in all of us) (Ibid, pp. 167-172).

6.) **Expose** how contemporary secularism postures itself—as essentially neutral, and as superior. But by what fixed authoritative standard does it arrogate to itself this status? Is the world really a better place because of every difference, ideology, and identity? ‘What about the Jewish holocaust? What about pedophilia? What about abortion as a convenient ‘out of visual view’ infanticide? Affirm that tolerance is valuable only when it operates within some belief or value system—and not when questions of tolerance and intolerance are cut off from questions of truth and morality.

7.) **Encourage** civility, evangelize. Stress that genuine tolerance is only possible IF people are free to proselytize. All forms of evangelism necessarily involve telling people where they are wrong in an effort to win them to a different direction. You will lose tolerance if you insist on eliminating this element of the freedom of religion (Ibid, pp. 172-174).

8.) **Prepare** to suffer. Jesus said that we would. Delight and trust in God (Ibid, pp. 175-176).