

Fundamentally childish

Christianity is the world's greatest force for tolerance. So why do liberals fear it so much? Maybe because tolerance isn't their real goal.

By Matt Kaufman

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A couple of professors recently pointed out something interesting about the word *tolerance*. We hear it all the time – practically every time a controversial moral issue comes up – and to hear most people talk, it's *the* most central principle in American life.

And yet, there've only been a handful of books on the subject.

So the professors, social ethicists Brad Stetson of Azusa Pacific University and Joseph G. Conti of California State University (Fullerton), set out to write just such a book: *The Truth About Tolerance: Pluralism, Diversity and the Culture Wars* (InterVarsity Press, 2005; 207 pages).

These days, the word *tolerance* is used not to start conversation but to stifle it – lest some group (say, homosexual activists) hears something (say, Scripture) that offends them.

Stetson and Conti argue that secular liberalism, which holds tolerance as its highest value, “intimidates its critics into silence and casts the weight of cultural suspicion [upon] them” while at the same time making “a whole host of moral judgments” on racism, affirmative action, abortion, same-sex marriage and church-state issues, among other things. Yet secular liberalism offers “no firm reason why people *ought* to be tolerant and give new ideas a hearing when they may not want to.”

That's so obvious you'd wonder why anyone tries to embrace secular liberalism. Can't they see they're undercutting the foundation not only of their opponents' beliefs, but of their own?

Sure they can – when they use their heads. But secular liberalism “is fundamentally childish,” Stetson and Conti write. It's “really nothing more than an exercise in self-justification and rationalization, substituting one's preference or wishes for any realities that do not coincide with those personal desires.”

That's a valuable insight, because it explains why so much debate about moral issues can be so frustratingly tiresome. You have to keep repeating the most elementary points: *Some things are right, others are wrong, and you can't change that with slogans like “my body, my choice.”* Yet the points never seem to sink in. If you think you're dealing with mature adults, you can't understand why. If you realize you're dealing with strong-willed children throwing a tantrum against God's rules, it begins to make sense.

Of course, not everyone who's skittish about Christians is merely being immature: For various reasons, some simply fear that Christianity breeds a desire to push people around. But Stetson and Conti argue that Christianity is the greatest single force for true tolerance, and that nothing else in history could have taken its place.

As the authors (in the best part of their book) explain, there are multiple reasons for this. To touch on a few:

- Christianity testifies to a God who loves all men and women – believers and unbelievers alike, sending rain to the righteous and unrighteous.
- The Christian emphasis on original sin strongly promotes humility and self-criticism: We are all directed to focus first on the plank in our own eye before the mote in our brother's, and to be thankful that we have not been dealt with as we deserve. Knowing about original sin also fosters realism about this fallen world – about the dangers of unchecked power and the folly of efforts to perfect (or cleanse) humanity.

- Scripture is full of explicit calls for “patient forbearance and forgiveness toward non-Christians (Rom. 12:14-21; 1 Pet. 3:9; 4:13-14, 19; 2 Pet. 3:9).” Stetson and Conti point out:

Paul urges believers to let their gentleness be evident to all (Phil. 4:5); he tells them to live humbly and not be busybodies (1 Thess. 4:11; 2 Thess. 3:11-12, 1 Tim. 5:13); he instructs them not to be easily angered and not to keep a record of wrongs done to them (1 Cor. 13:5); he models a tolerant and sensitive declaration of the Gospel amidst religious diversity (Acts 17:16-34); and Peter tells Christians to always answer questions and challenges to their faith with respect toward the questioner. Indeed, the entire Christian ethic of loving one’s neighbor and returning blessing for cursing is itself a call to toleration.

Factors like these aren’t just theoretical; they’ve been a major influence throughout Christian history. The authors know things don’t always work this way in practice; it’s not as if they’ve never heard of the Crusades or of the religious wars between Christians. These events, however, are hardly confined to Christians or religious people in general, as the blood-soaked, atheistic revolutions in France, Russia and Cambodia testify.

Still, Stetson and Conti take time to caution Christians about their own attitudes, including “the indulgence by some Christians in what has become an American culture of anger.” To beat people down would be, for Christians - well, intolerable.

What we do need to do is reach people (however many are willing to listen) with the truth: Tolerance is a part of God’s moral order, not a substitute for it. Civilizations that fall into confusion on this crucial point routinely crumble into decadence. “The depths of history are littered with such wrecks,” the authors remind us. “May the American experiment in self-government, so well-begun, never so flounder.”

Invasion of the language snatchers

From *The Truth About Tolerance: Pluralism, Diversity and the Culture Wars*, by Brad Stetson and Joseph G. Conti

[The] 1956 film *Invasion of the body Snatchers* . . . tells the story of Dr. Miles Bennel (played by Kevin McCarthy), a small-town physician who returns home from a medical conference to find his office inundated with patients claiming their friends and family have been replaced by imposters. As the story unfolds, the as-first-skeptical Dr. Bennel comes to believe that indeed people all over town are being physically replicated and replaced by aliens. The aliens look, sound and speak like the people they have replaced, but inwardly they are different. The mind, emotions and personality – the genuine substance of the victims, their identity – is missing. They are only the shell of their old selves. Sinister alien duplicates have taken over their bodies, removed the internal substance of the person and are now using this outward resemblance to further their own agenda of world conquest.

In the same way the concept of true tolerance has been replaced by an imposter that uses the same name. The false tolerance of today bears the verbal image of its authentic twin, and it trades on the social capital and general cultural respect that true tolerance so rightly is accorded. But the new tolerance is an imposter; it manifests a robotic affirmation of virtually any idea that is nontraditional and unthinkingly condemns criticism of its own judgments as bigoted or intolerant.

The alien tolerance of today is incoherent when challenged, and it is dehumanizing in practice as it works to shut down debate and squelch criticism, both of which are quintessentially human endeavors which help us to come to know the truth, and thereby truly know ourselves and our destiny.