for
Graham Cole
with thanks for
many stimulating conversations
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Several times during the last ten years or so I have been invited to give a “public lecture” at one university or another. These invitations arise when a university has set aside a sum of money to pay for the travel expenses and honorarium of someone nominated by a recognized university student group to come and give an address on some topic of public interest. For example, the local physics club may bring in a notable theoretical physicist to give a public lecture on the latest developments in the world of quarks. My invitations have come when a recognized student Christian group has made application to these funds and their proposal has been accepted. The possible topics are extremely wide-ranging. It is usually understood that the lectures are not to be overtly religious. The numbers who attend may vary from a handful to many hundreds, depending almost entirely on either the interest generated by the topic or the reputation of the lecturer, or both.

When it has been my turn, I have three times announced as my title the title of this book, “The Intolerance of Tolerance.” In each case the crowd that showed up was surprisingly large, and with a greater percentage of faculty attending than is usually the case. Believe me when I say that the reputation of the lecturer had nothing to do with the attendance: it was the topic alone that drew people. I ended each of these talks by stating my own convictions as a Christian and trying to show what bearing biblically faithful Christianity has on the sub-
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ject. In each case I allowed time for Q & A; in each case these exchanges were vigorous, courteous, sometimes amusing, and certainly (from my perspective) enjoyable.

All of this is a roundabout way of mentioning one of the streams that brought me to write this book. These occasional lectures have kept me reading about and thinking through this topic, and it is high time I set some of this down in book form. It does not take much cultural awareness to see that the difficulties surrounding this subject are eating away at both Western Christianity and the fabric of Western culture. The challenges before us are not going to go away any time soon.

The second stream was my book Christ and Culture Revisited (also published by Eerdmans). That book provides more biblical reflection and theology, but it more or less covers the waterfront: I tried to think about culture in pretty broad terms. By contrast, the topic of this present book is much more narrowly focused. As I wrote the earlier one, however, I kept noting subtopics that cried out for more detailed unpacking — and none more so than tolerance/intolerance. What you now hold in your hand is the result. Perhaps I may be forgiven if from time to time I refer back to Christ and Culture Revisited to provide the underpinnings for some of my arguments here.

Once again I am grateful to Andy Naselli, my very able assistant, for making helpful suggestions and for compiling the indexes.

D. A. CARSON
ONE

Introduction:
The Changing Face of Tolerance

To speak of “the intolerance of tolerance” might strike some people as nothing more than arrant nonsense — an obscure oxymoron, perhaps, as meaningless as talk about the hotness of cold or the blackness of white. Tolerance currently occupies a very high place in Western culture, a bit like motherhood and apple pie in America in the early 1950s: it is considered rather gauche to question it. To hint, as my title does, that this tolerance might itself on occasion be intolerant is unlikely to win many friends. To put the matter in a slightly more sophisticated way, tolerance has become part of the Western “plausibility structure.” As far as I know, the expression “plausibility structure” was coined by sociologist Peter L. Berger. He uses it to refer to structures of thought widely and almost unquestioningly accepted throughout a particular culture. One of his derivative arguments is that in tight, monolithic cultures (e.g., Japan), the reigning plausibility structures may be enormously complex — that is, there may be many interlocking stances that are widely assumed and almost never questioned. By contrast, in a highly diverse culture like what dominates many nations in the Western world, the plausibility structures are necessarily more restricted, for the very good reason

that there are fewer stances held in common. The plausibility structures that do remain, however, tend to be held with extra tenacity, almost as if people recognize that without such structures the culture will be in danger of flying apart. And tolerance, I am suggesting, is, in much of the Western world, part of this restricted but tenaciously held plausibility structure. To saunter into the public square and question it in some way or other not only is to tilt at windmills but is also culturally insensitive, lacking in good taste, boorish.

But I press on regardless, persuaded that the emperor has no clothes, or, at best, is sporting no more than Jockey shorts. The notion of tolerance is changing, and with the new definitions the shape of tolerance itself has changed. Although a few things can be said in favor of the newer definition, the sad reality is that this new, contemporary tolerance is intrinsically intolerant. It is blind to its own shortcomings because it erroneously thinks it holds the moral high ground; it cannot be questioned because it has become part of the West’s plausibility structure. Worse, this new tolerance is socially dangerous and is certainly intellectually debilitating. Even the good that it wishes to achieve is better accomplished in other ways. Most of the rest of this chapter is devoted to unpacking and defending this thesis.

The Old Tolerance and the New

Let’s begin with dictionaries. In the Oxford English Dictionary, the first meaning of the verb “to tolerate” is “To endure, sustain (pain or hardship).” That usage is becoming obsolete, but it still surfaces today when we say that a patient has a remarkable ability to tolerate pain. The second meaning: “To allow to exist or to be done or practised without authoritative interference or molestation; also gen. to allow, permit.” Third: “To bear without repugnance; to allow intellectually, or in taste, sentiment, or principle; to put up with.” Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary is similar: “1. to allow; permit; not interfere with.

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2. to recognize and respect (others’ beliefs, practices, etc.) without necessarily agreeing or sympathizing. 3. to put up with; to bear; as, he tolerates his brother-in-law. 4. in medicine, to have tolerance for (a specified drug, etc.).” Even the computer-based dictionary Encarta includes in its list “ACCEPT EXISTENCE OF DIFFERENT VIEWS to recognize other people’s right to have different beliefs or practices without an attempt to suppress them.” So far so good: all these definitions are on the same page. When we turn to Encarta’s treatment of the corresponding noun “tolerance,” however, a subtle change appears: “1. ACCEPTANCE OF DIFFERENT VIEWS the accepting of the differing views of other people, e.g., in religious or political matters, and fairness toward the people who hold these different views.”

This shift from “accepting the existence of different views” to “acceptance of different views,” from recognizing other people’s right to have different beliefs or practices to accepting the differing views of other people, is subtle in form, but massive in substance. To accept that a different or opposing position exists and deserves the right to exist is one thing; to accept the position itself means that one is no longer opposing it. The new tolerance suggests that actually accepting another’s position means believing that position to be true, or at least as true as your own. We move from allowing the free expression of contrary opinions to the acceptance of all opinions; we leap from permitting the articulation of beliefs and claims with which we do not

3. I should add that there is not a straight line from earlier dictionaries to later dictionaries. For a start, several dictionaries make rather striking distinctions between the verb “to tolerate” and the noun “tolerance” and other cognates. The distinction noted above, in other words, is grounded in a remarkable shift in current popular usage, not yet always reflected in dictionaries, which tend to lag behind. But one can find essays more than a century old that presuppose the “new” definition of tolerance: e.g., in 1891 Bernard Lazare wrote an essay titled “On the Need for Intolerance,” Entretiens politiques et littéraires 3 (1891); the English translation is available at http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/lazare-bernard/1891/intolerance.htm (accessed 28 Dec. 2009). Assuming that “tolerance” is “the characteristic of ages without beliefs” (a view that sidles up to the “new” tolerance), Lazare was arguing for strong religious and political stances: if you have strong and informed views, it is a virtue to be “intolerant” — by which he did not mean the silencing of opponents, but the vigorous defense of your views such that you denounce opposing views as wrong. While Lazare calls this virtue “intolerance,” provided one insists that opponents have the right to affirm their views one might argue that this is in fact the “older” tolerance!
agree to asserting that all beliefs and claims are equally valid. Thus we slide from the old tolerance to the new.

The problem of what “tolerance” means is in fact more difficult than these few comments on dictionary entries might suggest. For in contemporary usage, both meanings continue in popular use, and often it is unclear what the speaker or writer means. For instance, “She is a very tolerant person”: does this mean she gladly puts up with a lot of opinions with which she disagrees, or that she thinks all opinions are equally valid? A Muslim cleric says, “We do not tolerate other religions”: does this mean that, according to this cleric, Muslims do not think that other religions should be permitted to exist, or that Muslims cannot agree that other religions are as valid as Islam? A Christian pastor declares, “Christians gladly tolerate other religions”: does this mean, according to the pastor, that Christians gladly insist that other religions have as much right to exist as Christianity does, or that Christians gladly assert that all religions are equally valid? “You Christians are so intolerant,” someone asserts: does this mean that Christians wish all positions contrary to their own were extirpated, or that Christians insist that Jesus is the only way to God? The former is patently untrue; the latter is certainly true (at least, if Christians are trying to be faithful to the Bible): Christians do think that Jesus is the only way to God. But does that make them intolerant? In the former sense of “intolerant,” not at all; the fact remains, however, that any sort of exclusive truth claim is widely viewed as a sign of gross intolerance. But the latter depends absolutely on the second meaning of “tolerance.”

Other distinctions can be usefully introduced. Go back to the assertion “Christians gladly tolerate other religions.” Let us assume for a moment that the first meaning of “tolerate” is in view — i.e., Christians gladly insist that other religions have as much right to exist as their own, however much those same Christians may think the other religions are deeply mistaken in some respects. Even this more classical understanding of “tolerate” and “tolerance” leaves room for a certain amount of vagueness. Does the statement envisage legal tolerance? In that case, it is affirming that Christians gladly fight for the equal standing before the law of all religious minorities. Of course,

4. I learned this well from my father, who was one of the rare evangelicals who
from a Christian perspective, this is a temporary arrangement that lasts only until Christ returns. It is a way of saying that in this fallen and broken world order, in this time of massive idolatry, in this age of theological and religious confusion, God has so ordered things that conflict, idolatry, confrontation, and wildly disparate systems of thought, even about God himself, persist. In the new heaven and the new earth, God's desires will not be contested but will be the object of worshiping delight. For the time being, however, Caesar (read: government) has the responsibility to preserve social order in a chaotic world. Although Caesar remains under God's providential sovereignty, nevertheless there is a difference between God and Caesar — and Jesus himself has told us to render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. It will not be like that in the new heaven and the new earth. Thus even this legal tolerance, which Christians should surely defend, belongs to the present, to the time when the kingdom of God has dawned but has not yet been consummated, or (to say it the way theologians do) to this age of inaugurated but not yet final eschatology.

Of course, in the right context the same sentence, "Christians gladly tolerate other religions," might suggest, not legal tolerance, but social tolerance: that is, in a multicultural society, people of different religions should mix together without slights and condescension, for all people have been made in the image of God and all will give an account to him on the last day. Of all people, Christians ought to know that they are not one whit socially superior to others. They talk about a great Savior, but they are not to think of themselves as a great people. So social tolerance should be encouraged.

Yet another distinction demands brief mention. Someone might assert that the God of the Bible, even under the terms of the new covenant, does not hold up tolerance as a virtue: if men and women do not repent and by conversion come under the Lordship of Christ, they perish. Certainly the God of the Bible does not hold up tol-

supported the right of Jehovah's Witnesses to freedom of worship and proselytism, at a time when the Duplessis government of Québec was oppressing them: see my Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor: The Life and Reflections of Tom Carson (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008).

5. For a much fuller treatment of this point, see D. A. Carson, Christ and Culture Revisited (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).
erance in the second sense as a virtue. Yet is not God’s patience and forbearance in delaying Christ’s return a form of tolerance, intended to lead people to repentance (Romans 2:4)? Hence the distinction: bad ideas and bad actions are tolerated (in the first sense), reluctantly and with bold articulation of what makes them bad, while the people who hold those bad ideas or perform those bad actions are tolerated (again, in the first sense) without any sense of begrudging reluctance, but in the hope that they will come to repentance and faith. Tolerance toward persons, in this sense, is surely a great virtue to be nurtured and cultivated.

These and other distinctions need to be thought through a little more; they will be picked up later in this book. At the moment it is more urgent to explore more thoroughly how widely different the old tolerance and the new tolerance really are.

**Sharpening the Contrast between the Old Tolerance and the New**

Under the older view of tolerance, a person might be judged tolerant if, while holding strong views, he or she insisted that others had the right to dissent from those views and argue their own cases. This view of tolerance is in line with the famous utterance often (if erroneously) assigned to Voltaire: “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.”

This older view of tolerance makes three assumptions: (1) there is objective truth out there, and it is our duty to pursue that truth; (2) the various parties in a dispute think that they know what the truth of the matter is, even though they disagree sharply, each party thinking the other is wrong; (3) nevertheless they hold that the best chance of uncovering the truth of the matter, or the

6. Those exact words are not found in Voltaire’s literary remains but first show up in a book by Evelyn Beatrice Hall writing under the pseudonym of Stephen G. Tallentyre, *The Friends of Voltaire* (London: Smith Elder & Co., 1906). Voltaire did nevertheless leave behind not a few memorable statements on tolerance, e.g., “What is tolerance? It is the consequence of humanity. We are all formed of frailty and error; let us pardon reciprocally each other’s folly — that is the first law of nature” (the first line of his essay “Tolerance,” 1755).
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best chance of persuading most people with reason and not with coercion, is by the unhindered exchange of ideas, no matter how wrong-headed some of those ideas seem. This third assumption demands that all sides insist that their opponents must not be silenced or crushed. Free inquiry may eventually bring the truth out; it is likely to convince the greatest number of people. Phlogiston (an imaginary substance that chemists once thought to cause combustion) will be exposed, and oxygen will win; Newtonian mechanics will be bested, and Einsteinian relativity and quantum mechanics will both have their say.

One version of this older view of tolerance — one might call it the secular libertarian version — has another wrinkle to it. In his famous text on liberty, John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) opts for a secularist basis to tolerance. In the domain of religion, Mill argues, there are insufficient rational grounds for verifying the truth claims of any religion. The only reasonable stance toward religion is therefore public agnosticism and private benign tolerance. For Mill, people should be tolerant in the domain of religion, not because this is the best way to uncover the truth, but precisely because whatever the truth, there are insufficient means for uncovering it.7

A parable made famous by a slightly earlier thinker, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), nicely illustrates this perspective.8 Lessing sets the parable in the twelfth century during the Third Crusade. The setting is critical to understanding what Lessing was trying to establish by his parable. This setting is a conversation among three characters, each of whom represents one of the world’s three monotheistic religions: Saladin, the Muslim sultan; Nathan the Wise, a Jew; and a Christian Knight Templar. Saladin says to Nathan, “You are so wise; now tell me, I entreat, what human faith, what theological law

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8. The parable appears in *Nathan the Wise*, the last play written by Lessing. The German edition from which the English translation was first made was published in 1868 (Leipzig: Tauchnitz). The play reworks the parable of the three rings, which first appears in the fourteenth century in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. For background to the parable, see Alan Mittleman, “Toleration, Liberty, and Truth: A Parable,” *Harvard Theological Review* 95 (2002): 353-72. The English translation I have used is Lessing’s *Nathan the Wise*, trans. Patrick Maxwell, ed. George Alexander Kohut (New York: Bloch, 1939).
hath struck you as the truest and the best?” Instead of answering directly, Nathan tells his parable. A man owned an opal ring of superlative beauty and extraordinary, not to say magical, powers. Whoever wore it was beloved by God and by human beings. He had received it from his father, who had received it from his, and so on — it had been passed down from generation to generation, from time immemorial. The man with the ring had three sons, each of whom he loved equally, and to each of whom he promised, at one time or another, that he would give the ring. Approaching death, the man realized, of course, that he could not make good on his promises, so he secretly asked a master jeweler to make two perfect copies of the ring. The jeweler did such a magnificent job that the rings were physically indistinguishable, even though only one had the magical powers. Now on his deathbed, the man called each of his sons individually to his side and gave him a ring. The man died, and only then did his sons discover that each of the sons had a ring. They began to argue about which one now possessed the original magic ring. In the play, Nathan the Wise describes their bickering and comments:

[The brothers] investigate, recriminate, and wrangle all in vain
Which was the true original genuine ring
Was undemonstrable
Almost as much as now by us is undemonstrable
The one true faith.10

 Wanting to resolve their dispute, the brothers ask a wise judge to settle the issue, but his ruling refuses to discriminate:

If each of you in truth received his ring
Straight from his father’s hand, let each believe
His own to be the true and genuine ring.11

The judge urges the brothers to abandon their quest to determine which ring is the magic original. Each brother should instead accept his ring as if it were the original and in that conviction live a life of

10. Lessing, Nathan the Wise, 249.
11. Lessing, Nathan the Wise, 252-53.
moral goodness. This would bring honor both to their father and to God.

Lessing’s parable resonated with his eighteenth-century Enlightenment readers. The three great monotheistic religions were so similar that each group should happily go on thinking that their religion was the true one, and focus on lives of virtue and goodness, free of nasty dogmatism, the dogmatism that was blamed for the bloody wars of the previous century. What was called for, in other words, was religious tolerance. There is no harm in believing that your monotheistic religion is best, provided you live a good life and let others think that their religion is best.

Small wonder the parable retains its appeal to readers in the twenty-first century. People today are no less skeptical about claims to exclusive religious truth than were Lessing’s readers. They will be inclined to think well of a religion if it produces morally respectable and religiously tolerant adherents. Today, of course, the parable would have to be revised: instead of three rings, we would need dozens of them, if not hundreds, to symbolize the mutual acceptability of the many religious options, whether monotheistic, polytheistic, or non-theistic. And, of course, we could not concede today, as Lessing could, that one of the rings really is the original.

In some ways, of course, Lessing’s parable is not very satisfying. To make the parable “work,” at least three rather ridiculous stances have been incorporated into the story. (1) The god-figure in the parable, the man with the magic ring, foolishly promises the ring to each of his three sons, even though he knows full well he cannot make good on his multiple promises. Far from loving his three sons equally, he is presented as a weak fool who makes impossible promises. This is not an incidental detail in the story; it is an essential component that sets up why the father goes to the trouble of deceiving at least two of his sons with fake rings. So has God made impossible and mutually conflicting promises to his disparate sons, ostensibly loving all of them so much he ends up lying to them? (2) The entire parable presupposes that we, the readers, know what God has done. Far from fostering a benign tolerance on the ground that we cannot know which ring is the original, this tolerance is in reality grounded in the dogmatic certainty that God himself has produced fake rings because he cannot bear to disappoint
any of his sons. In other words, the story “works” only because the reader has this outsider’s knowledge of what God has done. Far from advocating a certain kind of epistemological restraint grounded in our ignorance of what God is like, the parable assumes the reader knows exactly what God is like: he is the kind of father who happily creates counterfeit rings to keep his boys happy and in the dark. (3) Equally implausible in the story is the way in which the fake rings are physically indistinguishable from the genuine original, yet lacking in the original’s power. If over time the original does not produce distinctive blessings owing to its magical properties, its magic is so weak as to be irrelevant. The counterfeits, in other words, are not only good copies physically, but they seem to work as well as the original provided each son thinks the copy is the original. In other words, we are taken away from a powerful religion that actually transforms people to multiple religions where it does not matter all that much whether one of them is truly powerful or not: what matters is that its defenders think it is powerful. The same problem faces the account of the dialogue between Timothy and the Muslim caliph of Baghdad about A.D. 800 — an account that Philip Jenkins has made popular:

Consider the story told by Timothy, a patriarch of the Nestorian church. Around 800, he engaged in a famous debate with the Muslim caliph in Baghdad, a discussion marked by reason and civility on both sides. Imagine, Timothy said, that we are all in a dark house, and someone throws a precious pearl in the midst of a pile of ordinary stones. Everyone scrabbles for the pearl, and some think they’ve found it, but nobody can be sure until day breaks.

In the same way, he said, the pearl of true faith and wisdom had fallen into the darkness of this transitory world; each faith believed that it alone had found the pearl. Yet all he could claim — and all the caliph could say in response — was that some faiths thought they had enough evidence to prove that they were indeed holding the real pearl, but the final truth would not be known in this world.12

Once again, there is a precious pearl, but only one precious pearl. Under this narrative, the dawning light will expose the stones for what they are.

Still, even though Lessing’s parable is riddled with conceptual problems, one understands how it made a powerful appeal in his day and continues to resonate with many readers in our postmodern world.

In one respect, however, Lessing’s parable is not very contemporary. Both Mill and Lessing thought that there is objective truth out there (after all, there is at least one magic ring!), but their rationalist and secular presuppositions drove them to infer that at least in some domains the truth is not accessible. One can think that something or other is true, and argue the case, but if one cannot prove that this something is true in a manner that conforms to the verification standards of public science, the wisest stance is benign tolerance.

In other words, the older view of tolerance held either that truth is objective and can be known, and that the best way to uncover it is bold tolerance of those who disagree, since sooner or later the truth will win out; or that while truth can be known in some domains, it probably cannot be known in other domains, and that the wisest and least malignant course in such cases is benign tolerance grounded in the superior knowledge that recognizes our limitations. By contrast, the new tolerance argues that 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 equally true. Lessing wanted people to be tolerant because, according to him, we cannot be sure which ring is the magic one — but he did not deny that there is a magic ring. The new approach to tolerance argues that all the rings are equally magic. That means the reason for being tolerant is not that we cannot know which ring is magic, nor that this is the best way to find out which ring is magic, but rather that since all the rings are equally magic or non-magic it is irresponsible to suggest that any of the rings is merely a clever imitation without magical power. We must be tolerant, not because we cannot distinguish the right path from the wrong path, but because all paths are equally right.

If you begin with this new view of tolerance, and then elevate this
view to the supreme position in the hierarchy of moral virtues, the supreme sin is intolerance. The trouble is that such intolerance, like the new tolerance, also takes on a new definition. Intolerance is no longer a refusal to allow contrary opinions to say their piece in public, but must be understood to be any questioning or contradicting the view that all opinions are equal in value, that all worldviews have equal worth, that all stances are equally valid. To question such postmodern axioms is by definition intolerant. For such questioning there is no tolerance whatsoever, for it is classed as intolerance and must therefore be condemned. It has become the supreme vice.

The importance of the distinction between the older view of tolerance and this more recent view cannot easily be exaggerated. I do not think that my summary of the new view of tolerance is exaggerated. In a much-quoted line, Leslie Armour, professor emeritus of philosophy at the University of Ottawa, writes, “Our idea is that to be a virtuous citizen is to be one who tolerates everything except intolerance.” The United Nations Declaration of Principles on Tolerance (1995) asserts, “Tolerance . . . involves the rejection of dogmatism and absolutism.” But why? Might one not hold a certain dogma to be correct, to hold it absolutely, while insisting that others have the right to hold conflicting things to be dogmatically true? Indeed, does not the assertion “Tolerance . . . involves the rejection of dogmatism and absolutism” sound a little, well, dogmatic and absolute? Thomas A. Helmbock, executive vice president of the national Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity, writes, “The definition of the new tolerance is that every individual’s beliefs, values, lifestyle, and perception of truth claims are equal. . . . There is no hierarchy of truth. Your beliefs and my beliefs . . .


14. When I say “much-quoted,” I mean I have heard the statement on radio talk-shows (e.g., Bob Harvey) and read it in books (e.g., Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, The New Tolerance: How a Cultural Movement Threatens to Destroy You [Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 1998], 43).
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are equal, and all truth is relative." If, however, the new tolerance evaluates all values and beliefs as positions worthy of respect, one may reasonably ask if this includes Nazism, Stalinism, and child sacrifice — or, for that matter, the respective stances of the Ku Klux Klan and other assorted ethnic supremacist groups.

In the next chapter I collect a sample of current developments along these lines. For the moment, it is enough to observe that under the aegis of this new tolerance, no absolutism is permitted, except for the absolute prohibition of absolutism. Tolerance rules, except that there must be no tolerance for those who disagree with this peculiar definition of tolerance. As S. D. Gaede puts it:

In the past, PC [= political correctness] generally centered on issues that were quite substantive. The Victorians were prudish about sex because they were enthusiastic about bourgeois morality. In the fifties, many Americans were intolerant of any notion that seemed remotely “pink” (socialistic) because they assumed communism to be a major threat to their economic and political freedom. Today’s PC, however, is intolerant not of substance but of intolerance itself. Thus, although the politically correct world would have a great deal of difficulty agreeing on what constitutes goodness and truth, they have no trouble at all agreeing that intolerance itself is wrong. Why? Because no one deserves to be offended.

Gaede’s shrewd insight prompts three further clarifications that pave the way for discussion in later chapters.

First, both the old tolerance and the new have obvious limits. The old tolerance, for instance, will happily allow, say, Islam to be preached in a Western country that is minimally Muslim. It may go so far as to allow militant Islam to be preached, even while it detests the message. But obviously it will not allow militant Muslims to blow up people and buildings: there will be repercussions, and the violence will not be tolerated. In due course those who advocate such violent

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actions may also find their freedom to speak curtailed. Again, the old tolerance will allow those who advocate euthanasia to propagate their views, even though most of those who defend the old tolerance think euthanasia is morally wrong. As long as laws about euthanasia stand on the books, however, they will prosecute those who practice it; they may even prosecute those who conspire to commit euthanasia in a particular instance (as opposed to advocating the practice in general terms). Similarly, the new tolerance might well prove very tolerant of all religions, but would worry about any religion that thinks it has some sort of exclusive path to salvation, and would certainly be opposed to any religion that advocates bombing its opponents.

Both the old tolerance and the new tolerance may actually share some limits: both, for instance, may tolerate the defense of homosexuality (though perhaps more in the first group will dislike what is being defended, while more in the second group will think homosexuality is harmless and may be a good thing), and both may even tolerate the advocacy (but not the practice) of pedophilia (because it judges the practice to be wrong). In other words, most in both camps will draw the line at the actual practice of pedophilia, or at the distribution of pedophilial pornography, not least because of the damage it does. So both the old tolerance and the new will use the specter of the person who falsely cries “Fire!” in a crowded theater as an example of where freedom of speech must be limited, where tolerance must not prevail. By and large, however, they do not think of tolerance in quite the same way (as we have seen), and very often they do not draw the limits of tolerance, however understood, in quite the same place.

More importantly, if Gaede’s insight, referred to above, is right, the old tolerance draws its limits on the basis of substantive arguments about truth, goodness, doing harm, and 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. Advocates of the new tolerance often find no more scalding epithet to hurl at those with whom they disagree than “intolerant” and related categories: bigoted, narrow-minded, ignorant, and so forth. Advocates of the old tolerance rarely charge their opponents with intolerance (although that is exactly what this book is doing!); rather, their epithets are shaped by their perception of the evil that cannot be tol-
erated (so defenders of euthanasia are committing murder, suicide bombers are terrorists, and so forth).

The fact that the new tolerance is most prone to label all of its opponents intolerant leads to a second reflection. The charge of intolerance has come to yield enormous power in much of Western culture — at least as much as the charge of “communist” during the McCarthy years. It functions as a “defeater belief.” 17 A defeater belief is a belief that defeats other beliefs — i.e., if you hold a defeater belief to be true (whether it is true or not is irrelevant), you cannot possibly hold certain other beliefs to be true: the defeater belief rules certain other beliefs out of court and thus defeats them. For instance, if you believe that there is no one way to salvation and that those who think there is only one way to salvation are ignorant and intolerant, then voices that insist Islam is the only way, or that Jesus is the only way, will not be credible to you: you will dismiss their beliefs as ignorant and intolerant, nicely defeated by your own belief that there cannot possibly be only one way to salvation. Your belief has defeated theirs.

So if a Christian articulates a well-thought-out exposition of who Jesus is and what he has done, including how his cross and resurrection constitute the only way by which human beings can be reconciled to God, the person who holds the defeater belief I’ve just described may listen with some intellectual interest but readily dismiss everything you say without much thought. Put together several such defeater beliefs and make them widely popular, and you have created an implausibility structure: opposing beliefs are thought so implausible as to be scarcely worth listening to, let alone compelling or convincing.

Put these last two reflections together and the scope of the challenge becomes daunting and alarming. The new tolerance tends to avoid serious engagement over difficult moral issues, analyzing almost every issue on the one axis tolerant/intolerant, excluding all others from the pantheon of the virtuous who do not align with this axis. Perhaps the saddest blind spot of all in this stance is the failure to recognize just how culturally driven this particular defeater belief is. For instance, in the Middle East almost no one holds to the belief that all

17. Tim Keller has popularized this terminology. See especially his The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism (New York: Dutton, 2008).
religions are of equal value; few dispute the postulate that there is only one way. What that way is, of course, is disputed. Advocates of the new tolerance are inclined to look down on the assorted cultures of the Middle East, holding that if the people in that region were all as “tolerant” as the advocates of the new tolerance themselves, peace would reign triumphant. Meanwhile many citizens of the Middle East view the advocates of the new tolerance as effete people who hold nothing precious but material possessions, who cannot think deeply about right and wrong, about truth and error, let alone about God. Too few on both sides ponder how one might build a culture in which people may strongly disagree with one another over fundamentals and still tolerate the opponents because they are human beings made in the image of God.

Third, granted that both the old tolerance and the new set limits to tolerance, not for a moment am I suggesting that the old tolerance always got things right while the new tolerance always gets things wrong. I am old enough to remember when in many parts of this country African Americans could not sit in the front of the bus: it was not tolerated. If, arguably, we are so politically correct today that we worry beyond reason about offending anyone, developing endless circumlocutions (e.g., “hearing impaired”) for perfectly good expressions (e.g., “deaf”), the flip side is that it is a relief to observe that words like “chink,” “spic,” “wop,” and “gook” have been thinned out. Prejudice never entirely disappears, of course, and we are wise to heed ongoing warnings against it. Now, however, the warnings against such stereotypical prejudice are delivered with such massive condescension, and across so many arenas, that new forms of prejudice spring up like dandelions in a wild field. It is what James Kalb nicely calls “inquisitorial tolerance.” Bernard Goldberg puts the problem bluntly:

Here’s the problem, as far as I’m concerned: Over the years, as we became less closed-minded and more tolerant of all the right
things, like civil rights, somehow, we became *indiscriminately* tolerant. “*You’re so judgmental*” became a major-league put-down in Anything Goes America — as if being judgmental of crap in the culture is a bad thing.\(^{20}\)

Before probing these matters more deeply, it is worth reminding ourselves how widespread the problem is (chap. 2) and reflecting a little on the checkered history of tolerance (chap. 3).

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TWO

What Is Going On?

It doesn't take much trolling on the Internet to uncover some remarkably awful statements from the religious right:

You say you're supposed to be nice to the Episcopalians and the Presbyterians and the Methodists and this, that, and the other thing. Nonsense. I don't have to be nice to the spirit of the Antichrist. I can love the people who hold false opinions but I don't have to be nice to them.¹

I want you to just let a wave of intolerance wash over you. I want you to let a wave of hatred wash over you. Yes, hate is good. ... Our goal is a Christian nation. We have a Biblical duty, we are called by God, to conquer this country. We don't want equal time. We don't want pluralism.²

If this is one’s only exposure to Christianity, one might easily develop a fair bit of sympathy for those on the left who find Christianity to be intolerant.

If Christian insiders were trying to read these two quotes as char-

2. Randall Terry, as reported in the *News Sentinel* of Fort Wayne, Indiana, for 16 August 1993.
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itably as possible, they might point out that there is a species of sub-
Christian scholarship that thinks Christian “love” seeks the other per-
son’s good in some sort of resolute fashion, without any necessary
emotional component: you can love some nasty pervert, they might
say, while emotionally hating their guts. The clause “hate is good” has
a certain rationale to it: there is a biblical mandate to hate what is evil.
Yet Christians at their best have known how to put together revulsion
of godlessness with transparent love for people who are enemies, not
least because they follow a Master who cried out in agony as he
writhed on a cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what
they are doing” (Luke 23:34). If Christians speak of “conquering” a
country by powerful evangelism, that is one thing; if they give the im-
pression that they are going to impose their will on a nation by force
of arms, or even by force of numbers, they are forgetting the distinc-
tions the Bible itself makes between Christ and Caesar, between the
church and the world, between legitimate expectations of what they
think should take place now and what they hope will take place in the
future. Worse, they also have an amazingly tin ear about how they are
going to be heard outside their own circles.

Yet without justifying for a moment much of this rhetoric, Chris-
tians who take these stances do so because they think the issues are of
such importance they are worth contending for. Most who respond to
them do not engage with the issues the Christians want to raise, but
simply outflank them by dismissing their intolerance with equal or
greater intolerance.

As far back as 1991, the then-preeminent journalist Lance Mor-
row opened his essay in Time magazine’s cover story “A Nation of Fin-
ger Pointers” with the following paragraphs:

The busybody and the crybaby are getting to be the most conspic-
uous children on the American playground.

The busybody is the bully with the ayatullah shine in his eyes,
gaulieiter of correctness, who barges around telling the other kids
that they cannot smoke, be fat, drink booze, wear furs, eat meat or
otherwise nonconform to the new tribal rules now taking shape.

The crybaby, on the other hand, is the abject, manipulative lit-
tle devil with the lawyer and, so to speak, the actionable diaper
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rash. He is a mayor of Washington, arrested (and captured on videotape) as he smokes crack in a hotel room with a woman not his wife. He pronounces himself a victim — of the woman, of white injustice, of the universe. Whatever.

Both these types, the one overactive and the other overpassive, are fashioning some odd new malformations of American character. The busybodies have begun to infect the American society with a nasty intolerance [emphasis added] — a zeal to police the private lives of others and hammer them into standard forms. In Freudian terms the busybodies might be the superego of the American personality, the overbearing wardens. The crybabies are the messy id, all blubbering need and a virtually infantile irresponsibility.³

Add to this insightful and humorous analysis the fact that both the busybodies and the crybabies are accusing their opposite numbers of intolerance, and Morrow’s piece remains a penetrating exposé of many of the polarizations that currently ravage public discourse. Irony is injected into the debate, however, when the intolerance of the busybodies is grounded, in their own minds, in their own tolerance — what Herbert Marcuse called “repressive tolerance.”⁴

What I propose to do in this chapter is canvas some of the evidence from the past decade or so, beginning with a miscellany of examples, and then focusing more pointedly on examples in the domains of education, media, and sexual identity, ending with some observations on how much of this intolerant tolerance is fixated on opposing Christianity.

Miscellaneous Examples

In 2005, the Co-operative Bank, based in Manchester, England, asked a Christian organization, Christian Voice, to close its accounts at the Bank because its views were “incompatible” with the position of the


Bank. The public statement of the Bank reads as follows: “It has come to the bank’s attention that Christian Voice is engaged in discriminatory pronouncements based on the grounds of sexual orientation. . . . This public stance is incompatible with the position of the Co-operative Bank, which publicly supports diversity and dignity in all its forms for our staff, customers and other stakeholders.” Thus in the name of supporting diversity, the Bank eliminates one of its diverse customers! Even here it cannot be consistent: the Bank doubtless has Muslim customers who are no less willing than Christian Voice to condemn homosexual practice. After the BBC news report of the story was released, the Bank further stated: “We accept that everyone has the right to freedom of thought on religion; however, we do not believe that this entitles people to actively encourage and practice discrimination.” Apparently the Bank thinks private religious thoughts are acceptable provided you do not act on them — which of course instantly trivializes religious belief. Meanwhile the word “discrimination” takes on the rhetorical power of “intolerance,” without any rational reflection on the fact that most human beings discriminate a dozen times a day, and the entire culture is awash in discrimination: we do not hire pedophiles as school principals, we do not appoint a functional illiterate to head up NASA, and so forth. Indeed, the Bank itself has of course discriminated against Christian Voice. The issue ought to be whether any particular act of discrimination is good, sensible, and proper, for there are both good and evil forms of discrimination. But instead of engaging with the issue (in this case, homosexuality; Christian Voice had come to the attention of the Bank because it had publicly condemned plans to broadcast Jerry Springer: The Opera, describing it as blasphemous), the Co-operative Bank discriminated against Christian Voice on the grounds that Christian Voice discriminates against homosexuals.

In the autumn of 2007, Donald Hindley, a sociology professor at Brandeis University, lecturing on Latin American politics, told his students that Mexican immigrants to the U.S. used to be called

5. The matter received a great deal of public notice. The BBC account can be found at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/4617849.stm (last accessed 2 January 2010).
“wetbacks.” The bare fact cannot be contested. In fact, when in 1954 the Eisenhower administration attempted to repatriate more than a million illegal Mexicans, the official name of the project was Operation Wetback. In today’s environment, however, a student complained. In the kerfuffle that followed, two students, apparently, said that Hindley’s remarks were more than an explanation of a historical fact. At the time, Professor Hindley had been lecturing for forty-eight years with no previous recorded complaint. After prolonged administrative to-ing and fro-ing, the University found Hindley to be guilty of ethnic harassment and imposed a classroom monitor on him to ensure his speech was never out of line — all without granting him a formal hearing or putting the charges in writing before reaching the verdict. Unwilling to be labeled guilty of such harassment, Hindley has fought back. As of early 2010, the case had not been resolved, but the heated discussion has brought relations between faculty and administration to a tense standoff and prompted FIRE (= Foundation for Individual Rights in Education) to put Brandeis University on its list “as one of the worst abusers of liberty on campus.”

In the medical field, it is hard to remember that a few decades ago doctors took the Hippocratic Oath, which includes explicit clauses against taking life, understood to forbid both abortion and assisted suicide. Since then, almost all medical schools have dropped the Hippocratic Oath, or at the very least the offending clauses. The story, however, does not end there. Doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals who still want to live under the constraints of the Hippocratic Oath because of beliefs that prevent them from performing or participating in what are now legal but still ethically controversial acts find themselves in a strange situation. More and more pressure is being exerted on them either to act in violation of their consciences or to abandon medicine. Until recently, “conscience clauses” protected these medical professionals, permitting them to opt out of medical procedures contrary to their conscience. Now, however, various legislative proposals are attempting to eliminate such conscience clauses. Medical professionals who judge, say, abortion and assisted suicide to be immoral would have to violate their

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consciences or leave the profession. The most strident voices declare that doctors, pharmacists, nurses, and the rest must put patients’ rights first. If they foresee that that could be problematic for them, they should choose another profession. Thus in the name of more tolerance for patients’ rights, the rights of doctors and other medical professionals would be curtailed — even though those patients could always go to another doctor, and even though a bare four decades ago all doctors had to abide by the very ethic that the new tolerance wants to make illegal.

If present trends continue, the procedures at the center of this debate will go beyond abortion and assisted suicide. It is not unthinkable that medical practice will accommodate eugenic infanticide (already openly practiced in the Netherlands) and harvesting organs from patients with catastrophic cognitive impairment (long advocated in not a few medical journals). It is still uncertain how these matters will play out in court decisions. My point is that the drive to enhance tolerance for diverse patients and their rights is demonstrably promoting intolerance to medical professionals.

The rising number of Muslims in England has prompted subtle (and not-so-subtle) eviction of pigs and their stories. In some schools, the story of the three little pigs is now banned, as Muslim school children might be offended by stories about unclean animals. The trend reached its silliest moment when the Council of Dudley, Worcestershire (West Midlands), banned all images or representations of pigs from its benefits department, on the ground that Muslims coming in for benefits might be offended. Calendars with pigs, porcelain porcine figurines, even pig-shaped stress relievers (spongy things you squeeze in your hand to relieve stress), all had to go, including a tissue box depicting Winnie the Pooh and Piglet — all this in a part of the country that traditionally has grown a lot of pigs. When pressed as to why pigs have to go, Mahbubur Rahman, a Muslim Councillor in West Midlands, explained, “It’s a tolerance of people’s beliefs.” Stunning doublespeak! What about tolerance of those who think differently.

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about pigs? In the name of tolerance toward the beliefs of Muslims, intolerance is imposed. In this instance, as one media outlet has put it, “tolerance” has on the lips of Mahbubur Rahman and in the decisions of the Dudley Council become confused with "Islamist supremacism." No one should doubt that Muslims ought to be free to express their dislike of pigs and pig representations; the problem, rather, is that Mr. Rahman thinks that getting rid of pigs and pig representations is a moral obligation that upholds the virtue of tolerance, whereas he senses himself under no obligation to uphold the virtue of tolerance and permit those who rather like pigs and their representations to keep them. Multiply this sort of confrontation a hundred times, and throw in a small but significant number of vociferous jihadist imams, and one understands why Prime Minister Cameron is at least raising some questions about how British immigration policy should be reviewed, not least to preserve a fundamentally tolerant (in the first sense) culture.

Or visit the website of the Harvard Chaplains. Not all religious groups join the United Ministry organized by the Harvard Chaplains, so the Chaplains feel it necessary to warn against “certain destructive religious groups” who are not part of the United Ministry. The Chaplains “are committed to mutual respect and non-proselytization. We affirm the roles of personal freedom, doubt, and open critical reflection in healthy spiritual growth. . . . We’re here to help you have a healthy, happy experience of your own spiritual journey while you’re here at Harvard.” I wonder if they think that’s why Jesus came: to help us have a healthy, happy experience on our own spiritual journey. Meanwhile the Chaplains warn against, among other things, those who claim “a special relationship to God,” and especially anything that qualifies as “ego destruction, mind control, manipulation of a member’s relationships with family and friends.”

On the editorial page of the New York Times for 24 November 2004, Nicholas D. Kristof writes a stinging attack on the “Left Behind” series written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, on the ground that these novels “enthusiastically depict Jesus returning to slaughter ev-


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