



A UNITARIAN DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Meaning of Tolerance



THE MEANING OF TOLERANCE

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this discussion guide is to stimulate us to think about a subject which is so clearly vital to our faith and to the way we live our lives.

It is hoped that we may discuss the subject, not only in relation to other peoples' beliefs, but in our secular lives too. We may want to ask ourselves why prejudice arises between people of different races and different classes, and whether it can be successfully combated by a simple emphasis on the need for tolerance. We may want to look more closely at the question of tolerating crime, or of tolerating different standards of art or entertainment. Above all, perhaps, we might do well to ask ourselves whether we are justified in regarding the Unitarian Movement as the most tolerant of churches, or whether it has begun to practise some monstrous form of self-deception by turning the concept of 'Tolerance' into a false idol which it worships meaninglessly and uncomprehendingly.

Martin Davies



www.unitarian.org.uk/docs

I TOLERANCE OR TOLERATION ?

The word tolerance comes from the Latin 'tolerance', meaning 'to bear' or 'to suffer'. We do not often think of tolerance in this way; it is associated in our minds with a passive quality - not with taking action but with allowing something to continue. But, if it is to make any sense, real tolerance must mean: 'How much can we bear before our very security is threatened?'. Tolerance is not a passive but an active quality in which we are intimately involved; it certainly does not mean sitting back and observing events from afar. Indifference is not tolerance but apathy.

This quality of 'actively bearing' with a person or an action is aptly illustrated by a story about the prophet Abraham. The story, which comes from the Talmud, is thus told by Jeremy Taylor, the 17th century divine:

When Abraham sat at his tent door, according to his custom, waiting to entertain strangers, he espied an old man, stooping and leaning on his staff, weary with age and travel, coming towards him, who was a hundred years of age. He received him kindly, washed his feet, provided supper, and caused him to sit down; but observing that the old man ate and prayed not nor begged a blessing on his meat, he asked him why he did not worship the God of heaven. The old man told him that he worshipped the Fire only, and acknowledged no other God. At which answer Abraham grew so zealously angry that he thrust the old man from out of his tent, and exposed him to all the evils of the night and an unguarded condition.

When the old man was gone, God called Abraham and asked him where the stranger was. He replied: 'I thrust him away because he did not worship Thee.' God answered him: 'I have suffered him these hundred years, although he dishonoured me; couldst not thou

endure him one night?'

It is this quality of 'bearing' and 'enduring' which distinguishes tolerance from toleration. Toleration tends to be cold intellectual acceptance in which there is no fire but only reason: the individual is not threatened in any way. While toleration seems to shine only when cast against the horror of intolerance, a 'bearing' tolerance is a quality needed in all realms of life.

Tolerance, along with freedom and reason, is often spoken of as a distinctive Unitarian principle. But although the word is often spoken its meaning is rarely pondered. What do we mean by tolerance?

When asked this question, many Unitarians will switch hastily from 'tolerance' to 'toleration'. They will talk about religious toleration - now happily no longer a really live issue in this country, but only in relatively authoritarian countries like Spain (favourite target for Unitarian pulpit indignation). When speaking on this subject, now so safe and uncontroversial, Unitarians will talk with partially justifiable pride of their historic contribution to the cause of religious toleration: of John Sigismund of Transylvania, the one and only Unitarian king, who in 1568 issued the first-known edict of toleration; or of John Locke, the anti-Trinitarian thinker whose Letters on Toleration provided the philosophical justification for the Toleration Act of 1689. EM Wilbur's monumental History of Unitarianism provides many further examples of the development of this kind of toleration.

Such toleration, however, belongs more to the realm of politics than to that of religion. But even in this field we have not fully reached toleration in this country: The Lord's Day Observance Society still holds too much sway, agnostics and Unitarians find it difficult to adopt children, homosexuals are persecuted, and so on.

But, apart from these points, toleration is remote in time and place from the lives of most 20th century men. If we wish to speak meaningfully to the everyday world we must speak not of toleration but of tolerance.

Basically, tolerance may be defined as a relationship between people who have come to terms with themselves. It is a living and ever-growing entity that has very little to do with the mere acceptance of ideas. Perhaps the best example of its meaning comes from the Gospel of John, Chapter 8:

And early in the morning he came into the temple, and . . . the scribes and Pharisees brought a woman taken in adultery; and having set her in the midst, they said unto him, Master, this woman hath been taken in adultery, in the very act. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such: what then sayest thou of her? . . . But Jesus . . . said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her. And they, when they heard it, went out one by one. . . even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the midst. And Jesus lifted up himself, and said unto her, Woman, where are they? did no man condemn thee? And she said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said, Neither do I condemn thee: go thy way; from henceforth sin no more.

Jesus, it seems, was able to tolerate the woman because he had faced up to the adulterous thoughts in his own heart. He had come to terms with 'the dark side' of his nature and had found an inner security that could not be disturbed. The presence of the adulteress did not therefore constitute a threat to his security. Without condoning her behaviour he could accept her as a person and offer her another chance, a new beginning (which is the meaning of his forgiveness). Would we be able to do likewise?

ARE UNITARIANS REALLY TOLERANT?

Are Unitarians really tolerant? In theory, the answer is 'Yes'. Dr Wilbur, who was a historian of Unitarian ideas and theories rather than a chronicler of Unitarian church customs, spoke of 'the way of tolerance, in which men, though disagreeing on incidental matters, allow each other equal liberty of belief and unite happily for practical ends which they have in common'.

But has this theory always been put into practice? Are Unitarians able to 'unite happily' with those with whom they disagree?

While it is true that Unitarians in their congregational life have often shown a quite remarkable willingness to 'allow each other equal liberty of belief', it is also true that they have sometimes found it difficult to 'unite happily' with people holding views that are different from their own. This is because when they come down from the lofty heights of religious idealism and live in the real world of human relationships they have as much difficulty as anyone in bearing with one another's provocations. Like Abraham in the parable they find it hard to bear with those whose beliefs and practices threaten to undermine what they regard as the very foundations of their individual and corporate existence. Those labelling themselves 'theists' find it hard to tolerate those who label themselves 'humanists'. Those who abstain from alcohol find it hard to tolerate those who allow beer on church premises or frequent the Queen Anne at Great Hucklow. Those with a strong preference for the 'hymn sandwich' type of service find it hard to tolerate those who wish to experiment (and vice versa). Those, like James Martineau, with strong middle-class prejudices find it hard to tolerate the social customs of debutantes and/or dustman. In short, the theorists of toleration find that the practice of tolerance is a difficult and painful business.

Toleration is easy and painless because it relates to a remote world of ideals and principles. Tolerance is difficult and painful because it relates to the world in which we live and move and have our being, the world of human love and hate, the world of Jesus and the Pharisees and the woman taken in adultery. Tolerance is primarily an attitude to people, and only secondarily to the ideas that come out of their heads. Tolerance is characterised not by academic detachment but by passionate involvement. It is a quality manifested in the true church whose bond of union is not a common set of ideas but a common concern for people.

We often like to call ourselves the true Catholic church, in that we draw no lines to exclude anybody. We have some pride in the knowledge that we are descended from the English Presbyterians who, in their day, were generally fairly tolerant, but who in 1662 were ejected from the Church of England by some very narrow sectarians. But in spite of this we can be as sectarian as any of the other Nonconformists. We are now very much a closed community, quick to react to any threat to our corporate security. This is illustrated by the many arguments over whether or not we should remain in the British Council of Churches.

So we must not rest too much on our laurels (laurels which we might find never existed) but must realise that we need fresh thinking on the matter of tolerance. Our churches are places where tolerance can be fostered; they are very necessary to provide men with a feeling of belonging. A church needs to become a microcosm of what people can be in their personal relationships. In the light of these facts we need to ask ourselves two vital questions:

- 1 How much can we bear or suffer in the way of differences and divergencies before we disintegrate as a church?

- 2 Since people need to feel secure in order to be tolerant is it not the function of the church to give people courage to live in the face of the insecurity and uncertainty which is the normal condition of existence?

III THE LIMITS OF TOLERANCE

The question is often asked: 'Where does tolerance end?' Without pandering to Communist or Fascist arguments, the ultimate answer seems simple: it ends at the point where it threatens our security as a community. The nature of our society makes it difficult for us to tolerate a real threat to our social security, however much we must bear with wide divergences in our society. Personal and social security are linked, and a threat to the individual and his rights is a real threat to society, and vice versa. When, for example, we are faced by pernicious ideas and practices that come from organisations like the British Fascist Party, what is our reaction? Here we have much to learn from the Jews; the following is an apt Hasidic story:

A father complained to the Baalshem that his son had forsaken God. 'What, Rabbi, shall I do?'. 'Love him more than ever,' was the Baalshem's reply.

Although this injunction seems so impossible in the face of evil, it is something that we must at least try. But this does not seem a very satisfactory answer in relation to the evils of Fascism, and we have to ask ourselves the question: 'Can we tolerate too much?' It has been argued that excessive tolerance was one of the weaknesses of Germany during the rise of Hitler. Everyone, including the Jews, allowed too much to go on for too long without taking some action. Non-resistance is a noble principle but it cannot be universally applied. The world prevents us from turning the other cheek too often.

But perhaps the basic answer to the problem lies in the deeper level of understanding. If someone hits us we must try to understand why they have done so.

If we really understand why, we will love the evil-doer and have compassion on him. Thus we will be able to enter into the I-Thou relationship (after Martin Buber) where love dwells.

When we examine the roots of intolerance we will nearly always find ignorance; blind ignorance is the real cause of the trouble and can only be dispersed by knowledge. Thus the true scientific spirit can never be intolerant. Science examines everything in an impartial light in the search for truth, wherever it may lead. However, tolerance can be stopped before it goes too far whilst science by its very nature cannot be stopped, for it will continue even if it means another form of total destruction.

Where does our tolerance end in relation to crime? When confronted by violence and murder, we cannot tolerate the crime however much in certain instances we may wish to - we can only bear with the criminal. Thus we cannot really talk in terms of society but of the effect that crime has in harming persons. The essential point is that we cannot tolerate activities that are harmful to people whatever is involved. On this subject another Hasidic story poses a problem:

Rabbi Wolf of Zbarazh once saw thieves robbing his home. He remained still and murmured: 'I do not wish to cause you to be guilty of a sin, and therefore I make you a gift of everything you take.'

In a moment he noticed that they were taking a jar containing medicine. He then approached them and said: 'Do not fear to take away whatever you can place in your bag, for I am presenting these things to you as gifts; but, I beg of you, do not consume the contents of the jar you have included. It is medicine and may harm you.'

Is there a point where theft of property becomes tolerable? The parable puts the value of the man ^{above} the value of the goods. Do we need to do the same in relation to so many of the crimes against property? As Proudhon said, property itself is often theft. Perhaps we have our priorities mixed up when we give excessive sentences to bank robbers and lenient fines to dangerous drivers. Yet again we must stress that people are more important than things, and the only really intolerable acts are those against people. Thus in many cases imprisonment can be an intolerable act.

Fanaticism comes under the umbrella of intolerance. Do we tolerate Jehovah's Witnesses who refuse to let themselves or their children have blood transfusions? Do we tolerate Christian Scientists who have a similar attitude towards medical treatment? The answer is very difficult to find, and we can only tentatively suggest that we should proceed on the basis that every individual and situation is unique.

IV THINGS NEEDFUL

Because we accept some of the ideas behind tolerance and toleration too easily, we need to give greater thought to their roots. To many, Unitarianism and tolerance seem to be synonymous, but this is not necessarily so; the more we realise that it is not so the more likely it will become a living reality within our movement. We must all, both individually and collectively, list those things that we will not tolerate and then take a long, cool look at the reasons why. On reflection perhaps we may come to a different conclusion. We pride ourselves on our willingness constantly to rethink our theological position. Surely we should be willing to do the same thing in relation to our pet hates.

As we have stressed all along, our great concern must be with human beings. Perhaps one of the reasons why Unitarians have not had this particular stress is, in part, due to the lack of impact that the study of psychiatry and psychology has had generally on the movement. Among religious denominations we are one of the least affected by the post-Freudian era, and we are only just starting to realise it. Our social ethos is impregnated with psychological concepts and we use words like 'introverted' and 'extroverted' as if they were among the oldest in the English language. Religion must be involved; Unitarians responded to Darwin in the last century - we must respond to Freud in this.

Today, toleration is not enough. It is no longer sufficient simply to quote Voltaire: 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.' Now we must exercise real tolerance: 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will try to understand the reason why you say it.'

SUGGESTED READING

The Spirit of Tolerance Katharine Moore (Gollancz),
an Anthology with a valuable introduction by Victor
Gollancz.

The Way of Man Martin Buber (Vincent Stuart)

I and Thou Martin Buber (T & T Clark)

God Is No More Werner Pelz (Gollancz)

The Prophet Kahlil Gibran (Heinemann)

The Divided Self RD Laing (Pelican)

Love, Hate and Reparation Melanie Klein & Joan
Riviere (Hogarth Press)

The True Wilderness HA Williams (Constable)

Objections to Christian Belief Ed AR Vidler
(Constable), especially the section on psychological
objections.

An Unfettered Faith A Philip Hewett (Lindsey Press)
especially Chapter 3

The Rebel, The Outsider and other novels by Albert
Camus (Penguin Books)

DISCUSSION POINTERS

- 1 The important distinction between 'tolerance' and 'toleration'. There is the need for active tolerance in specific situations in which we are involved, but as we cannot be involved in everything, toleration too has a place.
- 2 'Excessive tolerance weakens a persons' moral fibre.' Could this be true?
- 3 Much has been said about 'security' as a basis for tolerance, and 'insecurity' as a source of intolerance; this is no doubt true. But insecurity is one of the conditions of human existence, and if one has the courage to live in the face of it, even if it threatens one's sanity and very existence, the intolerance which usually arises from it can be nullified. One can learn to tolerate danger and get the hell of a kick out of living dangerously. This could be a vice or a virtue depending on the circumstances.
- 4 Tolerance and apathy are separated by a hair's breadth.
- 5 The Communist sees Capitalism as a threat to his social security: the Capitalist sees Communism as a threat to his. Each side only tolerates the other when the latter is too impotent to present a real threat. Practically all tolerance of minorities in Britain is based upon this principle. It could be questioned whether such a tolerance is good enough.
- 6 Political and religious tolerance are inseparable.
- 7 It is intolerant to say that humanism within Unitarianism arises from the insecurity of the Unitarian theistic position.

- 8 What makes a person tolerant? Is it his psychological make-up, his upbringing or what?
- 9 It is not enough to say, if we feel a dislike for a certain individual in a community, that we will endeavour to understand him, and when we do, we will love him. How do we go about this? There is nothing worse than some of the efforts made by people to be nice to each other when they really hate each other's guts. It would be healthier if they punched each other's noses!
- 10 If you are on starvation level, tolerance or its ideals does not exist. Is this a key statement for the future of mankind?