

Reading One: Four short comments on tolerance

(1) Baruch Spinoza was a Jewish philosopher who in 1670 argued that the freedom to philosophize can not only be granted without injury to piety and the peace of the Commonwealth, but the peace of the Commonwealth and Piety are endangered by the suppression of this freedom. “[For] every person is in duty bound to adapt religious dogmas to his own understanding and to interpret them for himself in whatever way makes him feel that he can the more readily accept them with full confidence and conviction.”

(2) Qur’an 2:62: Verily! Those who believe and those who are Jews and Christians, and Sabians, whoever believes in God and the Last Day and do righteous good deeds shall have their reward with their Lord, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.

(3) King Ashoka Maurya (269 – 231 BCE) of India, a Buddhist, had the following edict engraved on a stone pillar that still stands today: “The faiths of others all deserve to be honored for one reason or another. By honoring them, one exalts one's own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faith of others.”

(4) Michel de Montaigne in his 1580 *Essays*: "It is putting a very high value on one's conjectures, to have a man roasted alive because of them . . .

Reading Two: The Edict of Torda, 1568

King John II Sigismund of Hungary, encouraged by his Unitarian Minister Francis Dávid, (Dávid Ferenc), in 1568 issued the following proclamation:

“His majesty, . . . reaffirms that in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well. If not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone . . . and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching. For faith is the gift of God and this [faith] comes from hearing [teachings], and the hearing of [teaching itself comes to each person] by the word of God.”

This proclamation had the effect of giving full legal protection to four groups Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, and Unitarians, and extending “toleration” to others in Hungary including Jews, Muslims, and Orthodox Christians.

Tolerance

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The notion of tolerance suggests that we somehow manage to put up with some challenging or even disturbing *difference*. *They* think it is immodest for a woman to go about bareheaded in public, and *we* think that those headscarves are patently absurd. So in approaching tolerance, let's begin by considering some basic ideas about human differences, especially cultural differences in matters including religion.

First, differences really exist and matter. They should be taken seriously, not trivialized or minimized. They are not “illusory” or “superficial” in relation to some fundamental oneness that we might wish to believe in. For many people, this is quite hard to accept. On the other hand, cultural and religious differences are not absolute. They should not be exaggerated or regarded as essential features of the character of individuals or groups. Actual, real differences arise in history and change as part of human history. It is *not* that human history is the expression of some already-existent essential diversity of humans from different places or humans of different ethnicities.

It is really difficult for us to find a balanced understanding of this. For example, is there a “German” way of doing things, or a “Japanese” way of communicating? Of course there ARE real and actual cultural differences, and these ARE important, and it is foolish to pretend otherwise. It is good to learn about these differences. But as soon as we take differences seriously, we tend to fall into the trap of thinking in stereotypes. Of course he would say that, he is Japanese and that is the Japanese way. Or even, of course a woman WOULD say something like that. Of course he's a drunken brawler, after all

he's Irish. A broad understanding of actual patterns of difference is very different from thinking of each individual's behavior as an expression of their fixed, natural, essential character. But it is really *very* difficult to find the balance where we take differences seriously without treating them as absolutes. The world is all details and specifics, and it is always in motion; to survive amid this flux, we have to scrape around, constantly looking for patterns and generalizations. When we think we have found a useful pattern we cling onto it as though it were rock-bottom reality, our absolute map. And then instead of serving as a useful insight, it turns into a stereotype—a hindrance in our relations with others, a source of harm and hurt.

Just as it is difficult to sort out how to *think* about differences and how real they are, we also have conflicting *feelings* about them. Differences can cause real pain, revulsion, and give deep offense. In the controversy over a Danish cartoon in which the Prophet Muhammad was portrayed wearing a turban with a bomb in it, the European tradition of political satire and free speech came *painfully* up against the Muslim sense that it is unthinkably offensive to defame the Prophet in this way. Cultural differences definitely can make life harder and more confusing for everyone. But at the same time, differences they can be exciting and sexy. Diversity makes life richer and novelty can be a natural thrill.

It is a fascinating paradox that we crave adventure and new experiences, but are full of fear and loathing for the other, the alien. In other words, we both love and hate what is new and different. A major factor that shapes the balance between terror and thrill when facing a new stimulus is our sense of control or security. Generally, people enjoy roller coasters, but not falling off cliffs; games and sports, but not war. Likewise,

many enjoy so-called “ethnic” cuisine, novel tastes sensations, but often don’t always find the same fun when “ethnic” people move into their neighborhood with all of those strange smells and noxious customs. Most of us seek out novel stimulation, and do so just to that extent that we can tolerate any perceived threats to our physical or psychological security. And this is one reason that the power dynamics of cultural encounters—who controls the setting in which they occur—are always crucial.

And we can also say that encounters with difference are always instructive and transformative. We expect them to teach us about others, but along the way they also teach us about ourselves. Whether we resist difference or welcome it, we are changed by it. Marveling at what counts as good manners, or as fun, or as beauty in another cultural setting, we are inevitably drawn into a more self-conscious relationship with the cultural setting we have taken for granted. We may become more appreciative of some things, more critical of other things, in our home culture. At the same time, if we have felt threatened, we may seek security in a degree of neo-traditionalism, fundamentalism, or xenophobia. Either way, for better or worse, a bit of change is wrought in the world that we inhabit and help constitute.

How, then, does this relate to tolerance? Many of us learned in last fall’s Welcoming Congregation workshop series about a continuum of attitudes toward the diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities. The scale begins with repulsion and disgust, and then lists in progressive sequence: pity, tolerance, acceptance, support and appreciation. In this case, tolerance is presented as a good thing, a virtue—in contrast to intolerance and repulsion—but also as a minimal sort of virtue, in contrast to full appreciation of and support for this sort of diversity in sexual orientation. As the French

celebrate diversity (especially between men and women) with the phrase, *Vive le difference!* Welcoming Congregations are encouraged not *merely* to tolerate, but to rejoice in and actively support the difference between gays and straights.

This exuberant tolerance of sexual diversity is a 20th century extension of the older idea of *religious* toleration, an ideal developed most painfully over many centuries. The very existence of Unitarian Universalism (UU) is a crowning achievement in a long, bloody history of struggles for religious freedom. Being creedless and inclusive of many world traditions in the sources of our faith, I am sure we want to think of ourselves as the most tolerant of fellowships. But when it really comes down to it, how tolerant are we? And how tolerant should we be?

Let's focus on religious tolerance and say that it is a *willingness to live with religious difference*. This means that to be tolerant we have to be willing to accept that others' views regarding the ultimate meaning and purpose of life are actually and meaningfully different from our own, and yet nonetheless set a course for peaceful co-existence. We have to accept that others will, based on different beliefs, engage in practices—and teach their children to engage in practices—that we consider misguided nonsense at the very best. We have to deliberately allow, and not seek to suppress, religious practices, beliefs and attitudes that we feel quite sure are wrong or inferior. (I'm starting to feel less tolerant already.)

When we define religious tolerance in this way, the first question is whether we are indeed willing to take religious differences seriously. Many traditions—including some forms of Hinduism, Baha'i, and liberal Christianity—achieve a sort of pseudo-tolerance, which is actually a form of intolerance, by arguing that the apparent

differences among different faiths ought NOT to be taken seriously. When I invited Professor Bandopadhyay to speak to my class at CMU, he began by dramatically informing all of the students that they were Hindus. Their being Hindus without knowing it was the truth of Hinduism as the professor understood it. He seemed well able to tolerate the students' atheism and their Christianity, but only because his faith allowed him to regard these differences as false appearances. Similarly, some liberal Catholics show their magnanimous spirit by allowing that some followers of other faiths may be "anonymous Christians," people who can go to heaven because they live in the spirit of Christ even though they do not know it by that name.

I had the personal experience of being on the receiving end of this sort of generosity last fall. On a panel of religion speakers at CMU, I repeatedly told my Sufi, Baha'i and liberal Christian friends that I did not believe in God, but they—especially the Baha'i—kept insisting that it was perfectly ok for me to say such things as my way of relating to God. Their so-called tolerance of me was firmly rooted in their conviction that whatever I might call Truth or Reality was just another name for God. Frankly, I have heard a few of these same notes in certain Church of the Larger Fellowship sermons. The name for this approach is *inclusivism*: I am ok and you are also ok (at least in a secondary sense) because, in fact, whether you know it or not, you are not *really* different from me. You just seem different, but deep down we are just the same, connecting with the spirit of life, or God, or whatever ya' call it, each in our own way, using different words.

On the plus side, I think this sort of inclusivism can often be just as effective as true tolerance in promoting peace. Just imagine if the Protestants and Catholics, who burned each other at stakes for centuries in part because they took differences with

absolute seriousness, had instead adopted this sort of inclusivist view. Yeah, you say trinity and I say no trinity, but I know that deep down we are getting at the same thing. You say the wine and bread become Christ's blood and body, and I say they most certainly do not, but deep down we are getting at the same thing. Presto! Millions of lives saved, incalculable misery avoided. By and large, this is how Hindus, Sufis, and many others in India have traditionally worked out many of their more vexed religious differences. So I say: two cheers for inclusivism!

Why not three cheers? Well, how did my students feel when they were told that they were all Hindus? Not so much honored as a bit horrified and incredulous. How did I feel being told that I believe in the Baha'i God under a different name but just don't know it? Well, I didn't feel listened to or respected. It is demeaning to be *included* in this way. We can be sure that the other person is not listening to us or taking our point of view seriously. Now, if taking me seriously means that you will feel morally obliged to burn me at the stake, then go ahead, please, don't take me seriously. But we cannot really call this tolerance.

So: one powerful strategy for coping with the conflict and pain that difference can bring is *to deny its actual existence*.

An alternative approach, known usually as moral or cultural relativism, is to recognize cultural differences and take them VERY seriously, refusing to make any value judgments about the cultures of others. After all, standards for what is good, and true, and beautiful, and worthwhile are not handed down from the sky god or from Yahweh or whatever. They are all products of human culture. "There are or can be no value judgments that are true, that is, objectively justifiable, independent of specific cultures."ⁱ

Often, this is taken to imply that we ought should abstain from condemning the practices of diverse culture because making such judgments fails to acknowledge that our own standards have legitimacy only within our cultural framework. If we impose our standards of beauty and goodness and success on others, we are just obnoxious and self-deluded imperialists, unable to appreciate alternative ways of imagining what it might mean to be human.

Certainly a tolerance of diversity rising from the insights of relativism is a much-needed antidote to the arrogance that fed imperialist projects like the Indian boarding schools, where Native children were to be saved from their very Indian-ness. It is an antidote to the imperialism that still influences the policies of international financial agencies. If the people of Bhutan evaluate success in terms of indices of collective happiness instead gross domestic product, should we condemn them for holding their people back from the full commercial glory of our modern world? To take a more difficult case: If most people in China value, and have long-valued, harmony and prosperity more than individual political liberty, then do we have some divine right to administer correction? Maybe we should have put *them* in boarding schools too, but when we had that chance in the 19th century we instead used gunships to force opium into their country and then “shanghai-ed” their desperate poor to build our railroads.

But there are huge problems with relativist tolerance as well. When the British ruled India, they had to decide: Should we respect and tolerate the local culture and therefore allow widows to be induced to throw themselves on their husbands’ funeral pyres? Or should we respect the life of the individual women and impose our values by outlawing and forcefully preventing this practice? What about the practice of honor-

killing, where family members feel obliged to kill daughters who dishonor the family by having sex by marriage? Or what about the traditional practice, among the Masai and others, of female genital cutting, including excision of the clitoris? Does our tolerance or relativism or abhorrence of imperialism prevent us from condemning such practices, and even criminalizing them wherever we can?

And what *about* those Chinese dissidents? In October of 2010 the Nobel Committee awarded Liu Xiaobo the Peace Prize "for his long and non-violent struggle for fundamental human rights in China." Liu was unable to attend because he is in a Chinese prison. All news about the announcement of the award was censored in China. The Chinese Foreign Ministry denounced Liu's award, saying that it "runs completely counter to the principle of the award and is also a desecration of the Peace Prize." When Chinese dissidents are sentenced to long terms of hard labor for ordinary criticism of public policy, do our values call us to speak up on their behalf? Or does tolerant relativism and guilt about our imperialist history prevent us from making a squeak?

In her Easter sermon this year, Nana' enunciated a principle for steering through these difficulties. She argued passionately that we ought to be tolerant of Christians both around us in society and also within our UU association. But, Nana' did *not* argue for tolerance without qualification. She was careful to slip in the caveat that we should tolerate other religious views only insofar *as they do not harm others*. Case by case, we have to judge whether tolerating a certain practice is consistent with our principles, such as the intrinsic worth of each person. What about the Huichol religious practice that includes having children ingest peyote cactus? We generally think of giving hallucinogenic drugs to children as "doing to harm to others," but are we sure that this is

always true in every cultural context? Similar challenging questions might arise when we consider issues about headscarves in Islam, or polygamy.

And then there are the Christians. Among them, some teach their children that they are by nature sinful and deserve to go to hell; they terrify the children by telling them they will burn forever unless they accept Jesus. To me, this definitely seems to be “doing harm to others.” In fact, I feel that is a sort of emotional abuse and would be readily recognized as such if it were done in the furtherance anything other than a mainstream religion. At the same time, consider that Christians who act in this way certainly feel that we here at UUFCM are doing terrible harm to *our* children. Yet we would feel it most unjust if they were to make our fellowship illegal in some future theocracy.

And this is why actual religious toleration, the sort that contributed in some measure to the end of Europe’s religious wars, has to include mutual toleration by groups teaching things about God and hell that each party regards as harming and endangering the children being taught. In this country, most agree that the civil peace such tolerance brings is worth the cost, as terrible as it is. The free exercise and non-establishment clauses of the first amendment are our fundamental American agreement to disagree about just those things we all consider of absolute and ultimate importance. Hence even if we think Calvinist theology is really, really horrible, we would expect it to be tolerated even when Unitarian Universalists control the entire US government.

While such cases test the limits of our tolerance, there are innumerable cases where we seem to have a clear moral obligation to be *intolerant* even at the risk of being called arrogant imperialists. A great many of the most obvious cases involve the abuse of

women and girls: honor killing and genital mutilation seem clearly intolerable. And then there is rampant childhood prostitution and the children locked in sweatshops making our clothes. Or consider the discrimination against openly gay and lesbian teachers in American schools. When we hear that such practices are legal and deeply traditional in Mount Pleasant or some other community, does this move us to become more tolerant of them out of our deep respect for the community's culture?

There is such a thing as injustice, and even when it is done in the name of religion and tradition, intolerance of it is a virtue. Our seven principles are not just about tolerating individual differences in the language we use when talking about the meaning of life. They are not just about supporting one another in our diverse explorations of spirituality. They also call us to be passionately intolerant of war mongering and of injustices that deny people a voice in their own affairs or that violate their intrinsic worth.

It is difficult to find the balance-point where we take differences seriously without turning them into stereotypes. It is likewise difficult to sort out when our outrage might be a reflex of our cultural prejudice and when it is a genuine expression of our thirst for justice and dignity for all persons. In the former case our values call us to expansive tolerance and in the latter case to intolerance. We have to examine our emotional reactions, but also to study the situation deeply.

And then there is the final question: If something truly is intolerable, how should we respond? We can donate to organizations that fight for justice. We can protest, even go to jail. We can write letters. We can boycott and organize. We can hone our elevator speeches and spread the good news that UU is a sanctuary for seekers and the free-spirited. We can work for legal changes; participate in petition drives and political

campaigns. Skill in the tactics of social change will give us each different roles at different times.

For example, the Freedom Riders—who sacrificed themselves to desegregate the bus stations of the South—asked Martin Luther King to join them on the busses and he deeply disappointed them by declining. But his leadership was nonetheless crucial in many other ways, including serving as a trusted intermediary between the Riders and Attorney General Robert Kennedy. Just as we speak of the good cop/bad cop tactic in law enforcement, the fight for social change needs the work of both tree-shaking radicals and liberals who make jelly from the fruit that the radicals shake loose. Whatever is needed in this moment, let us be willing to become that.

The long arc of history has been slowly bending toward acceptance of the concept of universal human rights, an idea now institutionalized in the United Nations declaration on Human Rights, the United Nations office on Human Rights, and in actions by UN peacekeepers. While we work for peace in the most peaceful ways possible, perhaps only few of us are perfect pacifists. I think that most of us are willing in principle to use violence, if necessary in the last resort, to defend the rights of our families and ourselves. If this is so, then must we not also accept that there are some cases when violence is justified in defense of the fundamental rights of others as well? Or do we think our own personal safety is so uniquely important that only it can justify the use of violence? I think that we have to accept—with great caution and restraint—that force is sometimes justified in the defending the rights of innocent victims. In the same breath: Because of the terrible costs of violence, we have to use the minimal force necessary as the very last resort only in the face of the most extreme provocation. As a *gentle* angry people, we

learn from the violent history of intolerance among Christians, which is our very own history, that we must forbear to do the slow work of education and advocacy as we seek ever to bend the arc of history just a bit further toward the promised land.

ⁱ Alison Renteln as cited in Schmidt, Paul 1955 "Some Criticisms of Cultural Relativism" in *Journal of Philosophy* 52: 780-791.