
Clearly, Stetson and Conti write primarily to a Christian audience, encouraging a new culture of tolerance. The Truth about Tolerance delivers just that. The authors sound a call for their readers to engage in genuine tolerance, a tolerance that more accurately reflects the ideals of Jesus Christ. They clearly argue for an understanding of tolerance best understood by its historical meaning and by its being distinguished from its current misinformed understanding. The authors identify key principles in cultivating a society that is truly tolerant.

All readers are compelled to embrace the topic with responsibility. The authors do not shy away from political terms, such as, liberal or conservative, and do not hesitate to challenge all Christians, no matter whether they favor postmodern thinking or are skeptical of it. While the authors sensitively consider alternative perspectives, they directly state and reliably support their own positions. This style is quite comparable to a style shown by Stetson in other texts he has written. Though, as previously stated, this text is written for Christians, anyone interested in the pursuit of a tolerant society, would benefit for having read this text.

The value of the text is that it identifies and seeks to build from a common ground among many perspectives. Secularists and Christians are encouraged to embrace tolerance, joining together to try to rid society of authoritarian and oppressive
views and ways. Who could disagree with these goals? Stetson and Conti astutely point out, however, that different perceptions of who is authoritarian and oppressive exist among those of different ilk. Irrespective of people’s backgrounds, the authors advocate true and compassionate tolerance. They challenge the far right, “…Christians have by no means handled the truth well in recent decades” (p.84), and the far left, “What passes for deep thought in postmodern academia is often little more than an uncritical and rampant skepticism and subjectivity toward anything traditional” (p.72). The authors focus on helping people to truly care about how other people fare in their daily lives. If the reader genuinely cares about other people, this is a must read.

The authors intentionally make some assumptions transparent. Fundamentally, they believe that two poles exist relative to one’s understanding of tolerance: secular humanists comprise the left pole, and evangelical Christians comprise the right pole. Related is the assumption that those on the left (such as Sartre and William Godwin) insist on the infinite plasticity of human nature (unconstrained vision) and that those on the right (such as Aristotle and Martin Luther King, Jr.) insist on the structure of human nature, and thus, on adherence to the natural law (constrained vision). While the authors’ basic presuppositions clearly reflect those from the right, they also reflect those of the true liberal tradition.

First, the authors claim that healthy societies do not and will not exist without true tolerance. This is why they challenge all of their readers to reconsider not only an
accurate definition of tolerance, but also the value of tolerance. Second, tolerance can
and will only be embraced when an accurate understanding of truth and reality exists.
According to the writers, “Truth and tolerance are inseparable; truth can never be
oppressive” (p.12 & 25). Related to this claim is a sub-claim that truth and tolerance are
only meaningful when they are freely embraced. Being humble and open to allowing
facts to effect what one believes helps an embrace to occur. Third, a classic
understanding of tolerance, based on truth corresponding to reality, generates more
tolerance than the conventional redefinition of tolerance as advocacy.

The structure of the text breaks into three distinct parts. The first details the
historical evolution of the conception of tolerance. The second considers the interactive
significance of one’s perspectives on truth with one’s beliefs about tolerance. The third
summarizes the text, and culminates in a clear description of tolerance.

The first chapter, in Part I, introduces the reader to what seems to be an anti-
Western bias in the minds of those who value tolerance. It reminds the readers that
intolerance is a human problem, not particular to the West or to Christians. Several
clear, non-Western examples are provided. Chapter 2 considers major philosophers’
influences on today’s conception of tolerance. Views of Socrates, Aristotle, Heraclitus,
Sartre, C.S. Lewis, and others are presented and considered. The third chapter
considers Christianity’s contributions to initial conceptions of tolerance. The final
chapter of the first part highlights the impact made during the Enlightenment and beyond, in which the views of Voltaire, Locke, and John Stuart Mill are considered.

The second section starts off with a chapter which laments, that in today’s world, truth claims are associated more with intolerance than with tolerance. The authors argue that this has resulted in truth being no more than a foggy idea. Different theories of truth are reviewed. The next chapter, ch.6, highlights tolerance’s dependence on truth and the authors’ claim that for tolerance to occur, citizens must subject their own convictions to critical examinations by dialoguing with those of differing mindsets. Chapter 7 details how secular liberalism has come to replace traditional liberalism. Concern for understanding the source of rights, and concern for others’ rights have come to be replaced by concern with one’s own rights. The next chapter wrestles with the accusation that evangelical Christianity is intolerant. Readers are reminded that “the message of the cross of Christ does not require cultural privilege or social affirmation in order to flourish” (p.108).

The last section of the text culminates in 10 key principles of true tolerance. It starts with a chapter, ch.9, which reviews how American media has distorted the idea of tolerance. Ch.10 describes society’s ideas of tolerance, void of religious influence, and how that impacts society itself. Examples include laws against “hate speech” and the removal of references to Jesus or God on plaques, in speeches, or through symbols. New laws censor truth, and thus, foundational avenues to legitimate tolerance.
Throughout every chapter, the authors present potentially dry information, interestingly. Examples will follow soon.

The authors were able to state and substantiate their key claims several different times while making different emphases. All material flows easily, yet causes a reader to pause in thought fairly frequently. Transitions between points were smooth. Stetson and Conti illustrate their points well, visually, logically, and at times, humorously. In one example they suggest that truth and tolerance fit together like a diamond in a gold setting. In another example, making the point that tolerance is not intrinsically good (it is good only if one is tolerating what ought to be tolerated), the authors suggest that baking molds are morally good if they’re used to bake, but not if they’re used to beat the dog. Thus, what some postulate as tolerance, actually operates more like a socio-cultural “Trojan horse” (p.93). The baking molds are filled with ideological substances, more reflective of personal desires than with what is healthy for the recipients (see Plato’s quote below). In a rather humorous illustration, the authors describe Secular Liberalism’s biased grasp on tolerance, like that of a “pathetic aging beauty queen intent on hogging the stage” (p.81). As a last example, they warn against adhering to those who distrust someone simply because he or she owns a strong opinion; they suggest that one would never reject strongly worded statements like, “Racism is evil” (p.165).
The text is also loaded with excellent, thought provoking, and reasonably illustrative quotes. G.K. Chesterton quipped, “When people stop believing in God they don’t believe in nothing, they believe in anything” (p. 177). Sarah Boyle stated, “Tolerance is only complacence when it makes no distinction between right and wrong” (p. 161). In an acknowledgment of sound tolerance, Voltaire uttered, “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it” (p.50). And as the last example, Plato stated, “False words are not only evil, but they infect the soul with evil” (p.15). These quotes supplement the authors’ arguments rather well.

Clearly, certain writers significantly influence the authors. The teachings of Aristotle, A.J. Conyers, Dinesh D’Souza, Martin Luther King, Jr., C.S. Lewis, and Russell Kirk appear throughout the text. The authors rely on Russell for his understanding of American history and order and on Aristotle for his positions on the principle of essence, the natural law, and virtue as habit, not simply knowledge. Conyers’ and D’Souza’s specific studies of issues related to tolerance validated certain assumptions made by the authors. And C.S. Lewis’s and Martin Luther King, Jr.’s appeals to and defense of the natural/moral law provided sound logic and practical example to many of the authors’ points.

As stated earlier, the text culminates in 10 insightful and practical principles by which one ought to tolerate others. Briefly, the main points proceed as follows: in order to be what it is, tolerance must be offered to one with whom one disagrees; tolerance
must have limits while allowing for moral criticism and strongly held individual belief; important distinctions must be made within the concept of intolerance and between intolerance and non-tolerance; tolerance is a moral tool that contributes to civic order; to reject an idea is not the same as rejecting a person; and, tolerance is inevitably connected to moral evaluation and disagreement. The authors successfully extrapolate these points and other subpoints.

This text reads very well and I found myself agreeing with essentially every point in it. There was only one occasion in which I may disagree with the authors’ beliefs. On p.122, the authors seem shortsighted in their assessment of how liberals see conservatives, and how conservatives see liberals. They describe conservatives as seeing liberals as wrong, while liberals see conservatives as bad people. While I’m not sure that I disagree, somehow, I think conservatives (of which I consider myself to be one) also categorize liberals as bad people.

I know that I have, more often than I care to admit, thought this way… and I do not believe that I am alone. This admittance, however, illustrates the great strength of this text; it causes readers (if willing) to be truly self-reflective, while engaging in a true pursuit of a healthy understanding of tolerance. At this point, I’m still wrestling with some information presented in the 6th principle, and cannot say where I agree or disagree.
It seems that if secular liberals were willing to read this text, a healthy dialogue over the issues presented in the text, could actually occur. Stetson and Conti, while hard on the liberals, were not void of critical self-reflection when it came time to challenge conservatives or Christians either. While some of the vocabulary and in depth information might be beyond the typical undergraduate, undergraduates would benefit by reading this text due to their experiencing the truths in it, first hand, and due to its practical makeup. This text would also stimulate great discussions at a Graduate level. If you benefited by reading Dinesh D’Souza’s Illiberal Education (1991) or Doug Groothuis’ text, Truth Decay (2000), you’ll enjoy this text. You may also enjoy another text dealing specifically with the issue of tolerance and God written by Dan Taylor, Is God Intolerant? (2003).

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