

“Shut Up, Bigot!”: The Intolerance of Tolerance

America is in the midst of a raging national debate on issues surrounding sexuality and gender. If you dare to suggest that gender is determined by sex and is immutable, that same-sex sex acts are immoral, or that marriage is a permanent, exclusive union of husband and wife, then you will be called an intolerant bigot, hater, and homophobe.

Where does the charge of bigotry come from? Is it just a passing fad, a political and social tool for power and control, or do its roots go deeper?

Bigotry is defined as “intolerance toward those who hold different opinions from oneself.” Notice that bigotry is *not* intolerance toward the opinions or beliefs of persons other than yourself, but intolerance *of the other person*. Bigotry is not simply disagreeing with what someone else believes; it is an unwillingness to tolerate or accept the person who holds those beliefs.

A little reflection on this definition will reveal that the vast majority of bigotry accusations populating the internet and in public discourse are not legitimate ones. On the contrary, they are the consequence of a mistaken view of tolerance that is itself a product of a warped postmodern epistemology.

Two Views of Tolerance

Under the traditional view of tolerance, two aspects were required: first, that you respected the right of the person or individual in question to hold his beliefs and voice his opinions; and second, that you had a right to disagree with those beliefs and contest them both privately and publicly. As D.A. Carson paraphrases it in [The Intolerance of Tolerance](#), “I

disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." You do not have to like the person with whom you disagree, but you do have to respect and tolerate his right to speak.

This conception entails *tolerance toward the person* while allowing *intolerance toward beliefs*. Since beliefs are abstract objects communicated through propositions in written or spoken language, they have no inherent dignity in themselves. It does them no harm or offense to disagree with them or offer a rebuttal. Disagreeing with or being intolerant of a belief, in this view, is fundamentally different from being intolerant or hateful toward the person who holds that belief. In other words, this definition is built on a clear and obvious distinction between a person and his beliefs.

The traditional understanding of tolerance reflects a certain epistemology: namely, that there is such a thing as truth, it can be known, and the best way to discover the truth is through debate, reflection, and investigation. The pursuit of truth requires mutual cooperation, serious consideration of opposing beliefs, and persuasion through the use of reason. Coercion, exclusion, slander, and threats of force have no place in the search for truth.

Over the course of the last century, however, the old view of tolerance has been slowly transformed. The emergent new tolerance holds that persons who are truly tolerant accept the views of others and treat these individuals fairly. The key distinction is that under the old tolerance, one would accept the *existence* of other views even while rejecting some views as false; but under the new tolerance, one *accepts* these other views. In other words, all views are seen as equally valid and true.

The new tolerance [rejects](#) "dogmatism and absolutism," affirms that each person has the right to live by his convictions, and eschews imposing one's views upon others. Yet underlying this

view of tolerance is a fundamental contradiction. Is not this concept of tolerance being imposed on all peoples and cultures, in direct violation of one of its own tenets? And as Carson points out, "does not the assertion, 'Tolerance . . . involves the rejection of dogmatism and absolutism' sound a little, well . . . dogmatic and absolute?"

Therefore, despite its appeal and aplomb, the new tolerance is both intolerant and internally incoherent.

Intolerance: The Supreme Sin

A critical error of the new tolerance is that it conflates beliefs and persons. In this view, to accept divergent beliefs is to be accepting and respectful of the person who holds them; conversely, to reject a belief as untrue is thought to be a rejection of the person who holds that belief. To say, "I think your view is false," is akin to saying something unkind and insensitive about the person with that belief.

Thus according to the new tolerance, to be intolerant toward another's beliefs is to be intolerant toward the person. And intolerance toward persons, incidentally, is the definition of bigotry. So when traditionalists voice dissent against the array of beliefs held by sexual liberals, this is interpreted as a rejection of the people who hold those views. Thus, within the incoherent paradigm of the new tolerance, the accusation of bigotry appears justified.

For practitioners of the new tolerance, intolerance is thought to be the supreme sin because it offends and disrespects persons. No one deserves to be offended or disrespected, and such an offense is considered an assault on their very dignity as a human being. This is why the rejection of same-sex marriage, homosexual practice, and transgenderism is believed to be an attack on the dignity of people with such attractions and lifestyles. This is why Justice Kennedy, in his majority opinion in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, appealed repeatedly to the

dignity of LGBT individuals as a basis for their inclusion in the institution of marriage (as opposed to the metaphysical nature of marriage). To exclude them would have been an intolerant act, a defacing of their human dignity, and a supreme vice.

The claims of bigotry that stem from the new tolerance are moral claims: To reject the beliefs of the new sexual mores is to be intolerant of persons and to attack their dignity, and this is wrong. It is impossible to be a virtuous citizen if you are intolerant in this manner, and unvirtuous citizens who are bigots have no place in the public square; they are to be ridiculed, excluded, and publicly shamed.

This is why the battle for religious liberty and freedom of conscience is so important. There is the very real possibility that conservative voices and freedoms will be stamped out just as racist behaviors and attitudes have been. [Some individuals](#) naively claim that *Obergefell v. Hodges* will have no effect on issues of religious liberty, but such views ignore the current attacks against those who hold to traditional sexual norms.

If the current view of tolerance retains its cultural grip, conservatives will be systematically discriminated against and socially ostracized. Teachers will be excluded from faculty at liberal universities or denied tenure altogether. Businesses will be forced to abide by laws that conflict with their religious beliefs and consciences. Commencement speakers and guest lecturers will be uninvited to academic events, publishing houses and journals will refuse to print certain perspectives, colleges and universities will be denied accreditation and federal funding, and on and on. In other words, while the letter of our First Amendment rights might be upheld, their spirit and practice will be rejected by the greater society that is still functioning according to the mistaken view of tolerance.

Due to such repercussions it is imperative that conservatives,

libertarians, and traditionalists work together to dislodge the new view of tolerance from its cultural pedestal.

The New Tolerance's Rotten Postmodern Foundation

The conceptual underpinnings of the new tolerance can be traced back to postmodern epistemology. Postmodernism is complex, to be sure, but at its heart it is a form of cultural relativism. It rejects metaphysical realism in favor of the claim that reality is a social construct.

Objective and universally binding truth claims are thought to be impossible.

The only way to discredit the new intolerance is by attacking the philosophical foundations of postmodern theory. Unfortunately, postmodernism has thoroughly worked itself into Western culture, shaping Western assumptions and plausibility structures. "Plausibility structures" is a phrase coined by sociologist [Peter Berger](#), referring to structures of thought widely and unquestionably accepted throughout a given culture. They dictate what individuals in that culture will consider to be possible or impossible, plausible or implausible.

Over the past half century, the new view of tolerance has become a foundational plank in the conceptual structure of Western thought. This means that individuals who act according to the old understanding of tolerance will be met first with befuddlement, and then with scorn. The old tolerance is unrecognizable in a culture that has embraced the new vision of tolerance and adopted it as a plausibility structure.

Conservatives who dispute the views of sexual liberalism are called bigots because those who embrace the new sexual mores are beholden to the new tolerance as a plausibility structure. Postmodern liberals cannot even comprehend how one can simultaneously reject a belief and accept the person who holds it. Thus, the charges of bigotry that spew forth reveal the intellectual and interpersonal poverty and dysfunction in

which these persons live.

The Way Forward

The new tolerance turns out to be just as intolerant as the intolerance it abhors. By demanding that all views be considered equally valid, it cannot tolerate the old but correct view of tolerance, and it therefore becomes the intolerance of true tolerance. In the end, tolerance itself is destroyed, yielding instead to tyranny. When this happens, the new tolerance wields the libel of bigotry in order to intimidate and silence dissenters and impose conformity.

We must challenge postmodern thought at a fundamental level and reintroduce the old vision of tolerance into society. This will be most effective if we *practice* the old tolerance, visibly and powerfully demonstrating that it is possible to hold to objective truths and dissenting views while being respectful and loving toward those with whom we disagree. Such interpersonal virtues are rarely seen in a culture where social media exchanges and comment threads overflow with vitriol. Only by consistently and unfailingly teaching and practicing the old tolerance—and defending its epistemological foundations—will there be any chance of overturning the new tolerance.

So what will the future of American society and culture be? Will it be a place for true tolerance, where competing ideas and visions of human flourishing are openly and respectfully debated in the public square? Or will the new tolerance create a totalitarian regime that controls both private thought and public engagement through accusations of bigotry while masquerading as enlightenment and progress?

It's up to American citizens to decide. We must not be intimidated, and we must not be silenced, for the freedom and flourishing of an entire culture and her people are at stake.

[Image Credit](#)

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