

Superficial Tolerance Isn't Helpful

I have to admit, I've always been annoyed by the "COEXIST" bumper sticker, a picture of which I've included above.

It's not that I wholeheartedly disagree with the message. I do indeed believe that people of different religious faiths should be peaceful toward each other.

But at the same time, there's an underlying sentiment to the COEXIST bumper sticker that I find distasteful, and even harmful. It's the idea that religious convictions aren't really worth discussing, arguing about, or defending.

Really, it's a symptom of a more general, superficial tolerance that pervades America today—one rooted in a relativistic anti-dogmatism that no longer believes that "ideas have consequences"; that they do, and should, play a significant role in shaping worldviews, lives, and actions. (Of course, as many of you know, this form of superficial tolerance is rarely applied consistently.)

On the other hand, of course, there's an equally pervasive *intolerance* in America that is also uninterested in dialogue. The representatives of this intolerance are afraid to admit any shortcomings or holes in their own positions lest their "opponents" perceive it as a sign of weakness. They have a difficult time with the fact that other people exist who disagree with them, and their happiness is tied to getting these people to eventually give up their convictions. In the meantime, they comfort themselves by stereotyping and caricaturing these "others".

In the middle is an increasingly-shrinking group that practices an authentic tolerance.

And what does authentic tolerance look like?

It recognizes that ideas are important, that they shape lives, that they are subject to the categories of “true/false” and “right/wrong.” And it understands that differences about certain ideas can be the source of real discord and division.

Yet, it does not resort to objectionable tactics to resolve this division. It seeks to dialogue with differing beliefs through establishing shared principles in order to bring to light the real sources of disagreement. It’s comfortable with this dialogue sometimes becoming impassioned and heated.

I believe that this authentic form of tolerance is key to the success of what some refer to as the “American experiment.” A loose congregation of people and groups who primarily live by a creed of “to each his own” is not really a sustainable model for a nation. Nor is a forced melting pot that seeks the elimination of all differences through unjust means.

I think the American experiment can only succeed (and by “succeed,” I mean “last longer”) by clarifying and instilling certain shared first principles in its citizens, while at the same time continually encouraging honest and vigorous dialogue about differences.

Our goal in America is not merely to “coexist.” Our goal is an ever-greater unity. But, as Georges Florovsky once said, unity only comes about “through crisis.”

I think the actor Mike Myers also [put it well](#) when speaking of his home country. He said, “[T]he strength of a democracy is not how well we agree, but how well we disagree.”