

Why Tolerate the Intolerable?

By Rev. Roy Hamel

Webster's Dictionary defines "tolerance" as: "sympathy or indulgence for beliefs or practices differing from or conflicting with one's own." So when we tolerate, we simply allow the other guy to live, and breathe and practise his outlook on life. We may disagree with his values. We may have to indulge some things we don't like, but that's okay. Hey, he's free to disagree with us too.

Tolerance teaches us to live and let live. This is truly a virtue in any society. We overlook religious differences and we turn a blind eye to skin color, for all are equal. Cultural differences in food, clothing, hairstyle, body piercings, etc. are likewise viewed as matters of relative non-importance. Without a good bit of tolerance in society, we would soon be at each other's throats for a variety of petty reasons.

Because tolerance is so important, it may come as a surprise that intolerance is equally important to a civilized society. In fact all civilized societies must be soundly intolerant of many things. If they are not, there will be no true justice and these cultures will be unsafe places to live. It may help to look at a few concrete examples.

Would we, for instance, put our stamp of approval on a society that freely practised slavery? What about a culture that encourages wife-beating or one that promotes female genital mutilation? What about a society that regularly killed its widows by burning them on their husband's funeral pyre, as was practised in India many years ago? What about a country that would refuse to protect its children against child molesters and pornographers? What should we say about nations that practised child sacrifice by burning alive their little toddlers in order to appease an idol? Is not every person morally bound to be intolerant in the face of these evils? Are societies that tolerate such evils civilized and just societies?

I think not.

Every person draws a line in the sand. Certain things are intolerable because they are in fact evil. If we could imagine a person who tolerates all moral evil, one who rejects nothing as wrong, we would call him a moral leper and run from his presence. A moment's reflection thus leads us to see that everybody must at times practise intolerance. Tolerance is a virtue only when it is practised in the face of morally neutral issues, like race, harmless cultural customs, and religion. But tolerance of immorality and evil is itself evil. The blood of some 110 thousand innocent unborn babies in Canada is spilled every year for any reason and for no reason at all. By silent tolerance millions of Canadians give permission for the innocent to be slaughtered. We must abhor that which is evil and recognize that silence in the face of evil is moral treason.

In democracy we must be tolerant of many issues and practices that are morally neutral. But there is much in modern society that needs to be

rebuked and challenged, not tolerated.

May we see multitudes of humble, courageous, morally intolerant souls who refuse to tolerate the intolerable.