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Of Tolerance and Smoked Fish

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Among the distinctive delicacies of southern British cuisine is a certain variety of smoked fish: “Red herring are whole fish, cured in salt and then smoked for as long as three weeks, with their guts still in place. Being treated thus makes them acquire a reddish hue, and they become desiccated, hard to the touch, and fiercely strong tasting. They were a peculiarly local creation, traditionally the speciality of these two great herring towns and old foes, Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft.” (Black, 2005: 272–73).

This comestible, known since at least the fourteenth century (OED), is now rare partly due to over-fishing and partly due to current preferences which tend away from strong fish odors. In the seventeenth century red herrings were used to train hunting dogs (OED), as the strong scent would confuse the dogs and lead them off the trail. Thus, “escaping criminals in the 17th century would drag strong-smelling red herring across a trail to make pursuing bloodhounds lose the scent.” (Hendrickson, 1997: 568). Thus, since the early nineteenth century, a “piece of information which is or is intended to be misleading, or is a distraction from the real question” is termed a red herring (OED).

As this example illustrates, the history of words is an interesting study and the Oxford English Dictionary is an extremely useful tool for tracing the history of words in English.

In their essay, Michael Williams and Aaron Jackson underutilize the Oxford English Dictionary when they cite its definition of tolerance as “The action or practice of enduring or sustaining pain or hardship; the power or capacity of enduring; endurance.” (OED). This is the first definition in the OED and is marked by the editors as obsolete. It was the original meaning of the English word from the time that it was borrowed from French in the fifteenth century and disappeared in the early nineteenth century. The more modern usage is the third definition which began in the mid-eighteenth century: “The action or practice of tolerating; toleration; the disposition to be patient with or indulgent to the opinions or practices of others; freedom from bigotry or undue severity in judging the conduct of others; forbearance” (OED). As shown by Williams’ and Jackson’s examination of the implicit definition of tolerance in the psychological literature, this is the general definition in use by psychologists.

The fact that the authors only found one article addressing the topic in the psychological literature indicates that psychologists have not given much thought to the issue and generally use the common definitions in circulation among the population at large. This is a good thing, since they are not using some sort of private technical jargon.

Here is where a history of recent word usage might help. The principal work on the Oxford English Dictionary was done in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The developments in the usage of tolerance in the last half century are of some importance to understanding how the term is used. This has been laid out with some clarity by D. A. Carson. Carson notes that there are two general views held in Western society and that both are given the label tolerance. One
of these views precedes the other historically:
Under the older view of tolerance, a person might be judged tolerant if, while holding strong views, he or she insisted that others had the right to dissent from those views and argue their own cases. This view of tolerance is in line with the famous utterance often (if erroneously) assigned to Voltaire: “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” This view of tolerance makes three assumptions: (1) there is an objective truth out there, and it is our duty to pursue that truth; (2) the various parties in a dispute think that they know what the truth of the matter is, even though they disagree sharply, each party thinking the other is wrong; (3) nevertheless they hold that the best chance of uncovering the truth of the matter, or the best chance of persuading most people with reason and not with coercion, is by the unhindered exchange of ideas, no matter how wrongheaded some of those ideas seem. This third assumption demands that all sides insist that they opponents must not be silenced or crushed. (Carson, 2012: 6-7).

Carson explores some of the implications of this view:
The older view of tolerance held either that truth is objective and can be known, and that the best way to uncover it is bold tolerance of those who disagree, since sooner or later the truth will win out; or that while truth can be known in some domains, it probably cannot be known in other domains, and that the wisest and least malignant course in such cases is benign tolerance grounded in the superior knowledge that recognizes our limitations. (Carson, 2012: 11).

This view has subsequently changed both subtly and significantly:
The new tolerance argues that there is no one view that is exclusively true. Strong opinions are nothing more than strong preferences for a particular version of reality, each version equally true. . . . We must be tolerant, not because we cannot distinguish the right path from the wrong path, but because all paths are equally right. (Carson, 2012: 11).

And here the trouble begins:
If you begin with this new view of tolerance, and then elevate this view to the supreme position in the hierarchy of moral virtues, the supreme sin is intolerance. The trouble is that such intolerance, like the new tolerance, also takes on a new definition. Intolerance is no longer a refusal to allow contrary opinions to say their piece in public, but must be understood to be questioning or contradicting the view that all opinions are equal in value, that all worldviews have equal worth, that all stances are equally valid. To question such postmodern axioms is by definition intolerant. For such questioning there is no tolerance whatsoever, for it is classed as intolerance and must therefore be condemned. It has become the supreme vice. (Carson, 2012: 11-12).

Under the new understanding of tolerance, judging someone or something is wrong because all values are equally right and so forming as judgment about something or someone is intolerant (e.g., Ammerman, 2014: 217; Riley, 2005: 2). So because of this equivocation in what is understood by the term, the subject of tolerance has become a mine-field. No wonder that Williams and Jackson see the importance of grappling with the issue.

Carson sees the need “to think carefully about tolerance and intolerance” because
Every culture and every age necessarily displays some tolerance and some intolerance. No culture can be tolerant of everything or intolerant of everything; it is simply not possible. A culture that tolerates, say, genocide (e.g., the Nazis) will not tolerate, say, the Jews it wants to kill or homosexual practice. A culture that tolerates just about every sexual liaison may nevertheless balk at, say, rape, or pedophilia, or in many cases bigamy and polygamy. (Carson, 2012: 47).

Others have emphasized the importance of thinking carefully about tolerance because the prevalent “moral relativism and complete tolerance for every other point of view actually do not respect or honor those points of views; quite the opposite.” When people say they are being tolerant “what they are really, if unintentionally, saying is, ‘I don’t care enough about what you think or believe to pay it any attention. Your view doesn’t make any difference, it doesn’t deserve to be taken seriously.’” (Smith, et al., 2011: 67-68). So for many in the population at large, tolerance is simply a respectable name for apathy.

Williams and Jackson see a way of promoting tolerance in the work of the French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995). They do a respectable job of concisely summarizing his thought as it can apply to creating an understanding of tolerance in psychology. The intention behind their work is good and they make a good effort to elevate the discussion of tolerance. If we thought in those terms we would look at other people differently and the focus on toler-
ance would be on tolerating people and leave aside the question of tolerating ideas. If their effort fails, it will do so on two counts.

The first reason is that Levinas uses terms in an idiosyncratic way that becomes a special type of jargon. One will not, for example, find the word totalize used in the Oxford English Dictionary the way that the authors, following Levinas, have done. It may well be a mistake to totalize others in the sense that the authors and Levinas talk about, but that sort of language use is opaque to the philosophically uninitiated. Having psychologists use philosophical jargon with patients who are neither invites misunderstanding and confusion.

The second reason is that tolerance is something of a red herring. The scriptures never use the term tolerance or the verb tolerate. The only form of the root the scriptures use is the adjective tolerable, as in “It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you.” (Matthew 11:22). This is in the oldest English sense of tolerance as endurance.

Tolerance is not a Christian virtue. What the scriptures ask us to have is not tolerance but charity. Charity is not tolerance under any of the definitions I have discussed. On the one hand, charity “bearcheth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.” (Moroni 7:45). In this way, charity encompasses the original definition of tolerance as endurance but surpasses it as it is more than just endurance. One can tolerate, that is endure, something without hope. On the other hand, charity “rejoiceth not in iniquity but rejoiceth in the truth” (Moroni 7:45), which implies that there is truth and there is iniquity and that the person possessing charity can discern between them. This runs counter to what Carson describes as the new view of tolerance:

A commonplace among those who support the new definitions of tolerance is that the enemies of tolerance are guilty of adopting strongly asserted positions. They claim to know the Truth (with a capital “T”), and that is precisely what makes them most likely to be intolerant. (Carson, 2012: 81)

But the conflict between charity and certain definitions of tolerance runs deeper than that. Mormon’s discourse on charity begins stating: “behold, my brethren, it is given unto you to judge, that ye may know good from evil” (Moroni 7:15). Charity begins with judging and being able to discern good from evil.

Granted, because we “believe that man doth not comprehend all the things which the Lord can comprehend” (Mosiah 4:9) our judgment will not be as complete or accurate as God’s judgment, so we are admonished to “see that ye do not judge wrongfully” (Moroni 7:18). The Lord even told his prophet, “you cannot always judge the righteous, or . . . you cannot always tell the wicked from the righteous” (Doctrine and Covenants 10:37). So Mormon tells us “I show unto you the way to judge; for every thing which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ; wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God. But whatsoever thing persuadeth men to do evil, and believe not in Christ, and deny him, and serve not God, then ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of the devil” (Moroni 7:16–17).

It is not just ideas that we must judge but people too. “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits” (3 Nephi 14:15–16; cf. Matthew 7:15–16).

So we have charity not because we refrain from judging but precisely because we have judged. Charity informs our actions despite what we know about people and have judged about them. Acceptance of definitions of tolerance that require it to be non-judgmental, such as the new view or seemingly William’s and Jackson’s new definition inspired by Levinas, mean that tolerance runs counter to charity. Under those definitions we cannot have charity and be tolerant at the same time.

For a Christian, all this focus on tolerance should be fishy. Depending on how we define it, tolerance can be either a stepping stone to or a substitute for charity. If starting with tolerance, that is endurance, leads us to charity, it becomes a stepping stone. But tolerance understood as being non-judgmental conflicts with charity. When tolerance rather than charity is the goal, it has become a red herring.

References


Oxford English Dictionary.
