

This Virtue Called Tolerance

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IS tolerance a virtue at all?

Is it anything other than a mental confusion and personal cowardice?

Is it something that we ought to cultivate or that we ought to root out of our souls?

The Popular “Virtue.”

When any human virtue is praised as much as tolerance is, we reach the state of mind of Hamlet when he wondered if the praisers did not protest too much.

Naturally, we cannot start any discussion of tolerance unless we realise why it is so vastly praised. Like the rest of civilised men and women who have taken to themselves the pleasant prefix gentle, I abhor the cruelty and, if you wish, the intolerance of Hitler, Stalin, the K.K.K., the Jehovah Witnesses, the Jew-baiters, who make life intolerable for a large sector of their fellow men.

But is what these supposedly “intolerant” people are doing really intolerance?

Isn't it rather cruelty... or greed... or ignorance... or a sheer love of making others suffer... or jealousy... or a blind, animal distaste for those who block their purposes?

More Questions.

Since we seem to be in for a barrage of questions, I might as well go on.

Is any man who has firm convictions about anything whatsoever capable of being entirely tolerant?

Could you or I conscientiously respect a completely tolerant person? The sort of person who never cares what anyone says or does? Who thinks all truths and all shades of lies and errors equally tolerable? Who thinks nothing should be done to check the criminal or hold the beastly in control?

Putting it in one final question: When we moderns use the word tolerance, do we really mean tolerance at all? Or are we thinking of some other real virtue that has somehow stolen into that capacious and often inaccurate word?

Everywhere Today.

Tolerance is certainly a word that is thrown at us in the most unexpected ways. The leading quiz kid, little Gerry Darrow, in a famous broadcast that brought him basketfuls of mail asked for Christmas the gift of more tolerance.

Doctor A. J. Cronin, a Catholic and a writer of best sellers, writes his most successful novel, “The Keys of the Kingdom,” around a priestly hero whose outstanding virtue is supposed to be “tolerance.” Of the hero of this book the writer of the jacket blurb says:

“He believed that tolerance was the highest virtue, and that humility came next.”

Yet if Doctor Cronin himself — and as a doctor — describes anything with intolerance, it is the way the Chinese doctors treat the patients who fall into their hands. He would clearly be completely intolerant of a witch doctor trying his incantations over the body of his own (Cronin's) sick child. He would absolutely and indignantly refuse to share his offices with an Indian medicine man who believed he could cure every disease by dancing a devil dance around the patient.

But Tolerant?

I am quite willing to agree that Father Chisholm, the hero of Dr. Cronin's book, is a patient man and a wonderfully gentle one. I think he had a genuine desire to understand what the other man believed and why he believed it. He had all that fine instinct that makes a gentleman loath to cram his own convictions, however sacred they may be or however firmly he may hold them, down the unwilling craw of the other chap. He tried, as do all decent people, to see the good in everyone.

But tolerant?

Again, we must refer to the blurb on the jacket. The reader, we are told, is bound to think of St. Francis of Assisi when he reads about Father Chisholm.

Now undoubtedly in his love of human beings and his vast patience with them, in his unwillingness to beat them into submission or to sit in judgment upon their conduct or their religious beliefs, Father Chisholm does suggest the holy man of poverty.

But how utterly shocked St. Francis would have been had anyone called him tolerant?

St. Francis.

He clung to what he believed with an almost ferocious tenacity. He wept bitter tears over the sad plight of the Mohammedans. He yearned to pull sinners out of the quick-sands of their sins.

He longed to win the whole world to what he knew to be the religion that God had given through the voice and example of His Son.

Undoubtedly Francis of Assisi was the gentlest man since Christ. He was tirelessly patient with the sinful, the stupid, the stubborn, the tedious. He sat and talked pleadingly with the Moslem rulers who fell captive to his charms.

But he would have shuddered at the suggestion that he should regard Christ and Mohammed as joint rulers on the peak of some tolerant Olympus. He would have protested vehemently if anyone had urged that it didn't much matter what a man believed or what sort of road he tried to hew upward to the gateway of God. He would have given his life, not, like Voltaire, to preserve the right of a man to hold what he himself thought a wrong opinion, but to win a man to what he, St. Francis, was convinced was the essential truth.

Why the Question?

But before we plunge too deeply into the question, it might be smart to recall what makes "tolerance" the question of the hour.

Across the world have swept the forces bent on destroying all those who disagree with them and determined to root up any opinion that blocks their way.

We have lived to see the advanced liberalism of the world swing to the opposite extreme of totalitarianism in government and thought.

‘There must be one political system, and only one’. ‘The people of only one nation are the dominant race. All others are inferiors, destined to be subject and slave’. ‘All people must think only those thoughts dictated by a brilliant and unscrupulous propaganda’. ‘Minorities have no rights’. ‘All the strong freedoms by which we have lived are to be swept away’.

The picture is too familiar and immediate to need more than the roughest of broad strokes.

We have seen the fierce persecution of the Jews. We have seen Catholics in ‘revolutionary’ Mexico and Soviet Russia and Third Republic France and Bismarckian and Hitlerian Germany deprived of their natural rights because of their adherence to what they believed the teachings of God-made-man.

The rights of the individual have been stripped away from him as you might strip an insignia of rank from the officer who betrayed his regiment. National aspirations have been treated as unworthy even of contempt, as ridiculous, fit only to be crushed and suppressed.

Do We Mean It?

All that have we hated and despised.

And all of it we have lumped under the convenient baggage sign Intolerance. Those who on the contrary have hated this sort of thing have been called tolerant.

Intolerance, then, became the greatest of the crimes. Tolerance became the noblest of the virtues.

Now it is a historic fact that people are always bragging about virtues which they haven’t.

I’m talking now, not of the liar and the insincere, but of people who simply pat themselves on the back for the wrong quality.

Naturally, a murderer would, to protect himself, insist that he was full of the milk of human kindness and madly in love with his fellow man. The banker whose bank is teetering on a financial cliff will swear vehemently that he is completely solvent. The pursuer of innocence does not come in the guise of the howling wolf he is; he pulls up above his ears the pelt stolen from the lamb and camouflages his fangs by mouthing guileless “daisies.”

These men are frank liars. They simply claim to have virtues which they know they haven’t.

I’m talking now about the people who are themselves convinced they have this virtue, when really that “virtue” turns out to be some quality they never even thought of.

Honest or Frank?

Take the young people who brag about their honesty.

“Whatever else you may say about us — and perhaps that is plenty — one thing you’ll have to admit,” they brag: “We’re honest.”

What they really should say is, “We’re frank.” And that’s another thing entirely.

They probably are not a bit honest. They lie to their parents about where they’ve been. They waste in simply unscrupulous fashion the education that has been given to them. They steal book reports and hand them in as their own. They hand anyone who is simple enough to listen to them the most unblushing “line.” They cheat skilfully in examinations. They build up fabulous alibis to get themselves out of a jam.

But after all this dishonesty, about which they may be perfectly frank, they still think they are honest.

It's true, they admit, that they were tight last evening or not too careful about their personal conduct, that they put one over on the teacher or parents or told some chance acquaintance the most wonderful yarns. They don't see that this admission is merely frankness or candour; it has no slightest relationship to honesty. Murderers and highwaymen and bank robbers and kidnappers have been known to be notoriously frank. They have seldom been honest.

Faith or Hope?

So good Protestants today are in many cases all mixed up about the virtues of faith and hope.

They say, "I have faith in Jesus Christ," which is precisely what they haven't. They may not believe half the things He taught. Out of all His clear teachings they may have selected just those which they wish to include in their own private little creed.

What they really have is hope. They sincerely trust that in the end God will save them.

They have no faith in hell, but they hope that they won't go there.

They have no faith in Christ's doctrines concerning the Trinity; yet they hope to see God, whatever He may be like, face to face.

They don't follow Christ in His clear teachings on divorce. They hope he will understand their weakness and forgive them.

They don't accept any of the more difficult doctrines. They rely on His goodness to make everything right in the end.

While they are not quite sure whether or not they ought to believe Christ is God, they hope He will exercise a god-like protection over them and love them with a god-like forgiving love.

Really Patience.

So when people use the word tolerance today, they are in all likelihood thinking of another virtue entirely. They are thinking of the splendid virtue of patience, which we are inclined to call by the more modern name gentleness.

They do not admire a tolerant man. It is a question if they could admire him — supposing they understood what real tolerance means. They admire a gentle man or, if you prefer, a gentleman.

They like a man who is strong enough to be patient. They admire courtesy shown toward those who don't deserve it. They love those humane qualities and virtues which make a man attractive and charming and understanding and quick to forgive.

...and Gentle.

So I maintain that when Dr. Cronin created Father Chisholm he made him, like Francis of Assisi, wonderfully gentle. Father Chisholm loved everyone, even the most unattractive, who stretched out a hand for help. He was decent even to the men who stoned him and to the bandit chief who captured him. That was splendid. That was very like Francis of Assisi or Christ the gentle Saviour.

But could he be tolerant in the sense that he could think all religions equally good? Could he let that bandit chief destroy his work, his orphans in their battered orphanage, the nuns who depended upon him to save them? On the contrary he flung the torch that destroyed his enemies.

He was not tolerant enough to let the villains live to burn his orphanage, rape the nuns, hold his beloved little children slaves and prostitutes.

Sinner, Not Sin.

So Francis of Assisi would have been — and actually was — utterly intolerant of heresy, error, sin, the evil practices that make mankind wretched.

He loved the sinner, but he hated the sin. That sentence, old as it is, is the “*ultra quod non datur*” of human conduct. [Beyond which it is not given] And though he would have given his life to turn the sinner from his ways, he could not pretend that he thought the ways of the murderer, the seducer, the tyrant, the thief other than the intolerable crimes they were.

Voltaire Speaks.

Tolerance today is usually discussed in the light of Voltaire’s famous epigram, which is variously quoted. In substance it always comes to this: “I will fight your opinions with my life, but I will fight to the death for your right to hold them” — which is probably one of the most ridiculous statements ever made.

One can parody it rather easily:

“I will fight your criminal conduct with the best police force, but I will fight for your right to be a criminal.”

“I will enforce laws to prevent you from selling opium, but I will see that you have a law that permits you to go on selling that opium.”

“I will struggle to prevent your hitting my mother, but if you hit her, I’ll say, ‘Bully Boy, well done.’

“I will try to thwart your efforts to betray my country, but I concede your right to be as traitorous as you please.”

If Applied....

All one has to do is think for just a second where that principle, if it were put into practice, would lead us.

This man has the opinion that he is God. As such he has the right, he believes, over the life and death of others.

“I will fight against your ridiculous idea, but I’ll fight for your right to hold and practise your ridiculous idea.”

This chap thinks that Robin Hood was a wonderful character, and that he himself, as Robin Hood’s successor, has a right to be a gangster, local or international.

“I will fight to keep you from following your idea, but I will fight equally hard for your right to think you are Robin Hood and your right to hold up travellers on the highways or the high seas.”

This fellow believes that he will increase the world's supply of money by manufacturing counterfeit money in his basement.

"I'll fight to keep you from counterfeiting money, but I'll stop any F.B.I. men who try to smash your press."

This doctor thinks that the world would be improved if the practice of medicine were limited to the handing out of effective poisons to those who are annoyingly sick.

"I'll tell you to your face that you are an enemy of society, but I'll denounce the American Medical Association if it tries to have your license revoked."

Voltaire the Intolerant.

We could go on endlessly with this nonsense. I have often thought that the constantly insincere Voltaire merely said this in order to throw the authorities of his day off the scent. He wanted to say whatever he wished to say. So he insincerely gave that right to others. He shamed his contemporaries into tolerating him by saying, "Don't you see? I'd tolerate you under the same circumstances."

As a matter of fact he was bitterly intolerant.

His one slogan and motto and platform for the Catholic Church was, "Destroy the infamous thing!" One could hardly call that high tolerance.

He dynamited the educational systems of which he did not approve.

He lashed out in the most merciless satire at any person or any institution that he happened to find "intolerable".

He was intolerant of the lazy nobles, of the churchmen he disliked. He fought fiercely with Frederick of Prussia, and was utterly and equally without tolerance for royalty's sound opinions or nonsense.

He was as intolerant as is that modern "liberal," Bernard Shaw, who quite calmly consigns to the gas chamber any enemies of society he wishes to brand with the title enemy. He rages at doctors who practise vivisection and at little girls who sit down to eat a lamb chop. He regards charity workers as frauds worthy only of contempt.

Indeed, he finds it hard to bear up under the burden of living with the "so-called human race."

The Word Itself.

That phrase 'bear up' brings us to a brief analysis of the word tolerance. Dictionary definitions won't do precisely. They are too tintured with common usage. And it is precisely this careless usage that I regard as confusing.

Tolerance is a word that roots originally in the Latin word "fero," which has for its past tense "tuli," which means I carried, I bore, I sustained. So a tolerant person is one who bears and carries and sustains something laid upon him by his fellow men.

A tolerant man in that sense will "bear fools willingly." He does not slap the stupid in the face or lash out at the bore. He tries to bear the difficulties placed on his human shoulders by the sins of other men and women. He endures patiently; and since the word patient comes from the Latin word

“patior,” which means to endure, the fact that he endures makes him patient, and the fact that he is patient makes him endure.

Clear Limits.

But there are a great many limits beyond which no man is expected to endure. We are not supposed to endure crime. We pay a police department to see that we don't have to endure this.

We do not have to bear the weight of a tyrannous conqueror. We build our Army and Navy as safeguards against that possibility.

We do not have to be patient with the murderer who under our window whets his stiletto or loads his automatic. We are not required to be tolerant with the man whose avowed purpose is the seduction of our sister. We may lose our patience to the extent of defending our mother. We are not obliged in all gentleness to stand by while villains plot the downfall of our country. We do not have to bend our heads meekly when the thief snatches our purse from our back pocket.

“I'm a patient man, but I can be pushed too far.” That's a famous line and one that makes us instinctively nod our heads. The most patient man, the most tolerant man, the man willing to bear up under insults and personal abuse in the end will come to the fraying-out of his patience.

Gentle Understanding.

Oh yes; he really tries to understand his fellow men. He tries to make all possible allowances for them. He does not damn the criminal unheard or regard all aggressors as villains worthy of the hangman's noose.

In his desire to understand what has made men as they are, he looks into their backgrounds.

He works to discover whether there is not some method by which they can be saved from themselves. So in back of the fallen woman he sees the villain who tempted her to sin or the squalid home from which she fled in youthful repugnance. He can almost see the petty thief emerging from the slum in which he was born. He tries to find out what twist made the murderer turn to cruelty. He weighs the temptations that the other person may have suffered and thanks God that he himself was not so sorely tempted.

In trying to understand these elements, he comes to a point where he himself condemns no one. He leaves that for God and the lawful authorities. He himself knows only pity and a kind of deliberately blind acceptance of the best that is in everyone.

For Example...

Even in public enemies he makes an effort to see what led them to their courses.

He reads Mrs. Sanger's account of her own unpleasant childhood home and the wretched life of her mother, and he understands why she strikes out blindly at motherhood.

He hears “Scarface” Al Capone justify himself on the plea that as a public benefactor he is merely trying to supply drink for the thirsting Americans of prohibition days.

He reads Will Durant's autobiography, “Transition”, and finds out that that apostate never let himself learn his Catholic faith, which he left without knowing and denied before he had mastered.

He sees the twisted training of Oscar Wilde's youth, so he is not surprised that that young man went the sad, sinful way that was his.

Larger Cases.

Even on larger scales he tries to understand and be sympathetic.

He remembers the mistreatment and abuse heaped upon the Jewish people by kings who called themselves Christian and peoples who were supposed to be Catholic.

He thinks of the wrongs of the poor when he measures the excesses of a strike. He even tries to understand the terrible temptations of the rich which might account for their broken marriages, smashed homes, and frequent sinister selfishness.

All of this is almost the same as our saying that the man of goodness and patience tries to find the virtuous side in everyone. He looks for hidden goodness. He scrapes through layers of evil to find the one vein of gold.

Because they are the sons and daughters of God, however far they may be from God and astray in evil, he loves them. And it is impossible to be harsh or cruel with those we love.

The Gentle Way.

So it is that the gentle, patient man — tolerant, if you wish that word — is marked by certain happy courses. For instance, he never forces his opinion on anyone.

He leads his own life of conviction, according to the principles he knows to be true. Loving and prizing his own beliefs, he is more than willing to share them with others. He would feel it selfish and mean to keep them to himself. But he does not try to elbow his way into the confidence of others. He does not try to jimmy their minds in order to thrust in his truth.

If he sees his fellow men in any kind of danger, he is not likely to be tolerant.

He does not argue, "Evidently that fellow wants to walk off that cliff, even though the drop is a thousand feet. 'I'd better not interfere.'" He cries out in an effort to save him. He may even grasp the man's arm and try to draw him back to safety. He would think the man utterly mad if after this rescue he turned and snarled, "A tolerant man would mind his own business. I like walking off cliffs. I think it's a perfect way to get a change of scene."

Beware! Danger!

If he notices that a friend has picked up a glass of poison and is about to toss it off, down his throat, he does not say, "I wonder whether I would be intruding if I spoke up." He speaks up — sharply and peremptorily. "That's poison," he cries. "Don't drink it." If the man answers, "So what? I enjoy an arsenic highball before my dinner," he may yet try to stop him — by force. He does not beat his breast and cry in his secret soul, "Why didn't you let him alone, you intolerant fellow?"

So, too, if he sees his friend embracing some belief which he knows to be vicious or a course of life that he is sure will do him enormous harm, he is more than likely to speak up. He will not, of course, take the fellow by the throat and try to choke him into a realisation of his mistake. But he will not consider himself a bigot or an intolerant trespasser if he says, "I think you're making a great mistake. May I tell you why?"

A Mind Cannot Be Forced.

He knows that the mind cannot be forced. Yet he also knows that the mind can be persuaded.

He realises the utter futility of backing a fellow into a corner and saying, "Either you accept baptism, or I will fill you full of lead." Yet convinced as he is of the persuasive power of truth, he feels safe in saying, "May I present my case for your consideration? I think you would see the beauty of baptism if you realised that through it you become god-like, sharing divine powers and privileges."

He knows that you cannot teach by cracking a whip over the heads of the students or ramming arguments down reluctant throats. So he entirely rejects force as a means to win converts. But he does know the compelling power of a life dominated by a beautiful faith. He knows that most frequently people who deny the truth have never really seen it. So he tries to live persuasively. He takes any least opportunity to present the shining thing he regards as the truth.

Not Weak.

In all this he is gentle rather than tolerant.

He does not feel obliged to tolerate the criminal even though he understands him. He does not out of sheer pity for their bad bringing-up think that murderers should be allowed to roam the streets, guns in their hands. He thinks that police should be set to catch thieves. He warns his sisters how to deal with the lustful men who may pursue them.

Even the gentlest is roused to complete intolerance of evil people indulging in evil practices.

The Gentle Christ.

In that they are all only like the gentle Christ. Certainly no man ever loved his fellows more than the God-man did. No man was ever so consistently patient and understanding. He spoke the parable of the prodigal son and then played the role of Father to the returning Magdalen and the repentant Peter. He spoke of the lost sheep and then Himself was the Good Shepherd.

Yet He struck out at evil men with a fierce intolerance. He simply could not bear their conduct any longer. When after His warning He found, them still polluting the house of His Father with their commerce and sharp practice and short-changing of the visitors, He drove them out with the little whip that cut through the air and found frightened shoulders.

When the Pharisees persisted in their hypocrisy, He spoke of them in words that were without any trace of tolerance. "Whitened sepulchres," he called them, using the most stinging insult on which He could lay His tongue. For graves were horrible things to the Jews, places where only lepers and other outcasts could be allowed to stay. And these smooth, lying leaders of the people Christ stigmatised as graves — outside shining with fresh whitewash, inside filthy, with the rottenness of dead men's bones.

For the men who betrayed the innocence of youth He had a most intolerant figure of speech. It would be better, He cried out, if a heavy millstone were hung about their necks and they tossed into the sea than that they should be allowed to corrupt the sinless children.

Not a Bit Tolerant.

So while a gentle man, like the gentle Christ, may be patient with sinners and slow to resist the criminal that strikes at his own peace of life, he is not likely to be tolerant of the criminal who endangers the happiness and safety and innocence of others.

He does not bear patiently the murderer, the pander, the seducer. He is not likely to be gentle with the seller of rotten literature to little children. He does not ask the State to repeal the laws that make the adulterer of food likely to a prison sentence. He does not believe that the poisoner of springs should be allowed to roam at large with vials of lethal germs in hand.

He would be amazed if anyone suggested that he be patient with the traitor in his country who was waiting to blow up the nation's bridges and kidnap its government officials. He is opposed to witch-hunting and silly political scares. He is not at all inclined to be tolerant with fifth-columnists, whatever their form.

Who's Tolerant?

It is amazing how little tolerance we expect from really sincere men.

Here is the earnest, devoted doctor who really loves his profession for the good he believes it can do for humanity. Into his district moves a filthy quack... or an abortionist... or a fake from a diploma "mill," who preys on the innocent and actually inoculates them with the diseases he wishes to treat.

You and I would be shocked if the doctor showed tolerance towards men of this type.

Indeed, really fine doctors grow indignant with anyone who gets in the way of human healing — as do men and women who depend upon doctors for their health.

I was in Hollywood shortly after the death of Jean Harlow. How far the story was true, I cannot vouch; but the studio officials told me that the famous screen actress's mother was a Christian Scientist, who refused to allow the doctors to treat her daughter until it was too late. I found little tolerance on the part of those who had been attached to Miss Harlow, little sympathy for what they considered unnecessary and cruel and inhuman.

No Shysters.

Nor are lawyers likely to be tolerant of the shysters who trail ambulances and trick widows and orphans out of their inheritance. The Bar Association is not a particularly tolerant organisation.

Nor are honest business men likely to be tolerant of the merchants who sell rotten goods or charge unfair prices. The Better Business Bureau and kindred associations are paid to be hard on the wolves of the business world.

All this is so clear that one wonders how tolerance can be praised so highly when on so many occasions it would be no virtue at all but a simple crime against humanity. It is one thing to be gentle and kind to even the worst criminal. It is quite another to stand aside and tolerantly let him pursue his villainous way. Who would even dare suggest that such is a noble course?

Voltaire and Liberals.

But going back to Voltaire once more, we notice that it is "opinions" of which he boasted that he was tolerant — and never for a moment was he tolerant of opinions to which he objected — especially opinions expressed by the Catholic Church.

So the modern liberal is a man who affects to tolerate any opinion at all. He struggles to keep an open mind. He pretends to exclude no possibility. He claims he is big enough to welcome all shades of opinion. Even when he fights an opinion, he feels called upon to respect it.

Who's Tolerant?

Is anyone tolerant in that sense?

Certainly not the scientist. Where the known facts of science are concerned, he is hopelessly intolerant.

If to the great astronomer comes the youngster out of high school with this statement, "Listen, Prof.; you're crazy if you think that the earth moves round the sun, for I saw the sun rise and set just yesterday," the professor's conduct is entirely predictable. He will pat the youngster on the head and say, "I know it's a little hard for a young fellow to understand. But some day you'll grasp the reason why the sun is the centre of our system and the earth circles around it."

By no widest stretch of fancy can we imagine his saying, "Well now, young man, you've got something there. Of course there are those of us who believe that the earth moves round the sun, but I shouldn't want to shut out your opinion that the sun moves round the earth. You may be right. I may be right. Let's both of us keep our own opinions."

No; he wouldn't say that — if he wanted, that is, to stay on the university staff and out of the asylum.

Tolerant Scientist?

Or we can imagine a professor of chemistry approached by a young fellow dressed like a mediaeval alchemist. Says this strange newcomer who looks like an old-timer: "I want to teach your class tomorrow, professor; I want to explain that there are only four elements — earth, air, fire, and water."

The chemist looks at him in amazement. "Where in the world did you learn that?"

"Out of a chemistry book written in the year 1243," says the youth.

"Well," muses the modern professor, "there may be something to what you say. Suppose you take over tomorrow. I've taught the modern table of elements, of course. But if you think there are only four, maybe you're right. At any rate, I think my students should get both sides of the question, and then they can leave their minds open."

No Tolerance Here.

Would he say that? What do you think? He might pity the young fellow or decide that he had just come from a costume ball or escaped from an institution enclosed in high walls. He certainly would not have him kept in gaol until he admitted there were more than four elements. He would not throttle him and yell, "Say more! say more!" But we should not ask or expect from him tolerance of what he knows to be an entirely antiquated false idea.

The plain fact is that we cannot be tolerant where truth is involved. If we know a thing is true, we can't say, "I know that is true, but it's perfectly all right to have you think that it isn't true."

Such conduct would make us simply ridiculous. So we know that George Washington did live. If anyone proposed a theory that he didn't live, we might be amused, tolerant in the sense that we would listen to him spin his nebulous arguments, but in the end we would be just where we were before he started — and utterly intolerant of his nonsensical idea.

If Ibsen says (and he did say it) that on the moon perhaps two and two make five, we don't say, tolerantly, "Well maybe on the moon all men are lunatics, and two and two do make five."

We intolerantly brush aside his moonshine and go on holding what we know to be true.

We may be tolerant, if you wish, with the person who talks this nonsense. We don't strike him across the face. We don't chain him up and beat him every day until he confesses he is wrong and we are right. We don't call him names and lay rough hands on him. We are gentle and patient even with the fool or the perverse. But we are not even slightly tolerant of his crackbrained ideas.

When Are We Tolerant?

If we are tolerant about the other fellow's opinions in the sense that we say, "Well, you have as much right to your opinion as I have," a number of things may be surmised about us:

Perhaps we regard these opinions as not worth bothering about.

Or we think our own contrary opinions not worth defending.

Or we may realise that what he holds has no relationship to life anyhow, and is too trifling to have any effect on the course of the world.

Or we simply show that we don't believe that the things we hold are really true.

Not Important.

If a man comes to me and says, "After all these years I finally have proof that the moon is made of green cheese," I am not likely to burst into a furious argument. I should probably greet this amazing return to the nursery with a shrug of my shoulders. The whole thing is too insignificant for me to worry about. If he wants to believe that the moon is made of green cheese — fine with me. He can even think he is a mouse bent on nibbling the moon provided he doesn't in his role of mouse start to gnaw me or my belongings.

Or a man says positively: "Mothers-in-law are not things to fume at; they are merely funny."

As it happens, I haven't a mother-in-law, and in the course of nature or grace shall not have one.

So if he thinks mothers-in-law amusing, that is of utter unimportance to me. I am completely tolerant on the subject. There he can believe whatever he wishes.

Not Worth Defending.

Sometimes we are not sufficiently interested in our own opinions to bother to defend them and, by so doing, to exclude all others.

Sometime ago I read "Oliver Wiswell." Up to that time I had always regarded Benedict Arnold as a traitor and a scamp; the book insisted that he was a hero and a gentleman whose "treason" was motivated by the highest love of country. Well, as far as I am concerned, Benedict Arnold and the whole question of his treason are equally dead. I was a little annoyed at what I believed to be a false attitude. But I wasn't enough concerned with my own opinion either to denounce the author or to rush to authentic sources to find out which of us was right. Let Benedict Arnold and his treason lie in their unhonoured graves. Neither was of any real concern to me.

I happen to think that blue is the most charming of colours. If I came upon someone who believed that yellow was the choice of all true artists, I should refuse to be ruffled, to get into an argument, or to show any signs of intolerance. I like blue. You like yellow or purple or battleship grey.

Who cares?

A musician meets me. "What composer do you regard as the greatest?" he demands.

"I don't know who is the greatest," I answer, "but I have always enjoyed Tchaikovsky most."

"You fool," he cries; "Beethoven is far and away the master."

Now I don't like to be called a fool; but if that chap thinks for a minute he is going to involve me in any argument about dead and gone musicians, he has a number of guesses left. I like Tchaikovsky. He prefers Beethoven. Let it rest right there. And if he insists that I say Beethoven is the greatest, just to please him I may say "Beethoven is the greatest." The issue is trifling, and what I think makes no difference one way or another.

No Effect on Life.

Or there is the possibility that I may think that the opinions involved have no real reference to life itself. Thought is cheap, I argue. What difference does it make what a man believes? It has no reference to what he does.

That was the "liberal" attitude which for a century pretended to dominate our civilisation.

As a matter of fact, it makes all the difference in the world what a man thinks. If an idiot thinks of himself as a lamp shade, he is going to go about trying to find a lamp to sit on. If a man is persuaded that he is a bird, he will try to take off. And, if a man believes he is a soulless animal, why shouldn't he in all logic begin to behave like a beast?

Now ever since Voltaire laid down his utterly impractical principle of tolerance, the "liberals" of the world have struggled to be hospitable to every idea.

Too Hospitable.

However, they took that comprehensive attitude chiefly toward religious, philosophical, economic, and political principles.

Does God exist? Is there any revealed religion? Have you a soul? Is there any difference between men and animals? Are men really free? Are there any principles of right and wrong to govern men in the making of money? Are nations bound by laws as individuals are? For that matter are individuals themselves bound by laws?

The questions could go on indefinitely.

The answers were limitless in number.

What difference did it all make? None of the answers, the liberal held, was important, anyhow.

And one's own opinion, though pleasant enough, was not really worth defending. Oh, in science one could be intolerant. In mathematics one could be inflexible. But what difference did it make whether or not God existed? Who cared whether we had a soul? And what were the odds if a man broke the Ten Commandments, and the big powers ran all over the world, gobbling up the smaller nations and creating vast empires?

‘About all these things let’s be tolerant. Let’s let anyone hold any opinion that he wants to hold. It doesn’t make any difference anyhow.’

Consequences.

So women said, “I don’t believe there is any such thing as impurity.”

And the liberal said, “What does it matter?”

And the women began to live as if impurity didn’t matter.

And men said, “I don’t believe there are such things as right and wrong.”

And the liberal said, “Who can be sure?”

So we had the ruthless conquerors of imperial empires, the money barons who played pirate on Wall Street, the gangsters who became briefly our national heroes, the rebels who spit in the face of God.

Bad Jolt.

Then all of a sudden the liberal, the man who believed that you must be utterly tolerant about what the other fellow believes, got the jolt of the century. He got Hitler and Stalin and the Brown Shirts and the Black Shirts. And tolerance blew up like a bombed glass factory.

Even up to the point of their real awakening they had not been practising, these liberals, the tolerance they claimed as their great virtue. They maintained that after all there might be a variety of political theories and we should be open-minded toward all of them. So they were extremely open-minded toward all the forms except Fascism. Toward Fascists their liberalism failed. They could not be tolerant. They hated them and wanted them wiped from the earth.

They were tolerant toward all religions — provided, of course, that the religion was not Catholic. They dabbled in the Eastern cults and embraced in their affection the thousand forms of Protestantism; but they excluded from their tolerance the Catholic faith and practice.

Fatal Results.

Then came the real awakening. “Time” some months ago wrote it up under Literature and Books in its book-review section: “This Return of the Liberals.” The liberals suddenly realized that Hitler and Stalin were simply inevitable outgrowths of the “tolerance” which they, the liberals, had extended to more or less all forms of thinking.

For as a man thinks, so he is. Only the liberals were a little late in discovering the obvious.

Hitler and Stalin had been doing a lot of thinking. They thought that war was a glorious thing; so they set themselves to wage it. They thought that men were just animals; so they treated men with colossal contempt. They wrote a new philosophy of the State that was as old as paganism itself — the State was supreme and men and women had no rights except those that the State gave them; so they treated their subjects as slaves who had no right to voice, to thought, to meeting, to religion. They abolished God with a gesture; so there was no force that they need fear. They talked of the supremacy of one race or of one class, and they followed that talk with an effort to make that German race or that proletarian class supreme over all others.

They thought that men were animals, so they behaved like brutes. They wondered if men had any freedom; and if man had no freedom, how could Hitler be blamed for plunging three continents into a bath of blood, or Stalin for binding his dependents with chains? They held that there was no

heaven for which to hope; so logically they determined to get right here and now as large a slice of earth as they could possibly grab.

Liberalism Thumps.

Liberalism fell with a dismal thud.

The liberals, who had been so tolerant of everything, became fiercely intolerant of ideas and men and political systems and whole nations. They denounced with fury the slavery of Nazi Germany and the slavery of Communist Russia; they had no tolerance for that sort of thing. They were all for getting Hitler with bloodhounds or trench mortars or bombing planes or assassins' knives. They had no tolerance for him. They regarded Fascists, whatever the shade of the shirt, as the curse of the earth. They could not include in their tolerance either the Fascist Italians or the Nazi Germans. They had cried, not five years ago, that nothing was worth fighting for; now they were all for bombers for Britain and our own Navy's ranging the seas to exterminate the forces of the intolerable enemy. [Remember, reader, this was written in 1944 and many of the 'liberals spoken about were not even 'tolerant' enough to put adjectives in front of Italians and Germans when speaking of their condemnation.]

All of which just indicated their belated grip on the old principle: As a man thinks, so he is.

They sharply realised that if you are tolerant of a man's principles you cannot be surprised at his living according to what he believes.

Real Virtues Last.

Kindness and gentleness of heart stood the test even of tyrants and war. Those who loved their fellow men still loved them. Christians prayed even for Hitler and Stalin.

But the tolerance that had contended it didn't make any difference what a man believed or thought or held found itself right in the exact centre of a blitzkrieg, bombed out of its ivory tower, blasted out of its cloistered study.

Loving Yet Intolerant.

As a matter of plain fact one can love one's fellow men and still be honestly intolerant of those ideas of theirs which are destructive or evil.

St. Francis, to whom we keep recurring, loved the Mohammedans. He went the long, painful, dangerous journey to see if he couldn't win them to Christ. But where their religious ideas were concerned, he was fiercely intolerant. He hated a religion that denied that women had souls. St Francis had come across this teaching in many of the Alawite Moslems whom he met in the camps of Sultan Malik Al Kamil. He thought it horrible that people should — in what were called the houses of God — be taught to hate all infidels and to gain heaven by spilling the blood of those infidels. These teachings he found in the sultan's camps. He loathed the Mohammedan's sensuous heaven, which set as the ideal of man's aspirations lustful pleasure and the abuse of women. [St. Francis had been told that many of the Moslem soldiery longed to enter 'Jannah', the Islamic paradise where they could indulge in alcoholic beverages with no ill-effect and be granted many 'virgins' as their spouses all of whom would be blissfully happy in the soldier's presence as he would be given the strength of one hundred men!]. He could not bear to think that the sweet Christ had been anywhere supplanted by the blood-hungry, much-married Mohammed.

The missionaries who went into India loved the Hindus with a deep affection. They gave their lives for these little, wandering children of God. But they could not conceivably be tolerant of the Hindu religion. They saw all around them the horrible caste system. Men were born pariahs, outcasts, and so they must remain. There was nothing that even the best Hindu could do about it, for that caste system was part of the religious belief. People were born into this outcast state because of sins they had committed in a former life. This was their punishment for unrepented sins; and it was a crime against the Hindu religion to make less horrible the lot of these outcasts.

Intolerable.

Nor could the missionaries tolerate child marriage or the burning of widows on the pyres of their husbands. It was quite all right to demand sweet, unselfish service to Hindus; it was ridiculous to ask Christians to be tolerant towards religious ideas that led inevitably to the squalor and misery of India.

No missionary who has ever been in China can help loving the Chinese. But that love does not require him to be tolerant toward Buddhism. Buddhism in its original form destroyed all concept of God. That left man an orphaned bit of flotsam tossed on a purposeless sea of life. Realising the horrible loneliness of such a religion, forms of Buddhism swung to the far extreme and gave its worshippers millions of tiny gods. And that was silly.

Could Christians be expected to be tolerant toward the filth and squalor of the Tibet of the 1930's, where prayers are said, not with the heart, but with the whirl of a wheel? Could they be tolerant towards the common Chinese opinions that girl babies are fit only to be thrown out for the slave dealers or the masters of prostitutes to retrieve from death? Could they be tolerant toward a philosophy that looked always back to the past and never toward the future? This was the China that missionaries everywhere encountered at the beginnings of the 20th century.

What Then?

What is the consequence of all we've been saying here?

The virtue which we should all love and practise from our hearts is a vast patience for all the sons and daughters of God.

Call this gentleness, if you will, or human pity, or understanding. It is the sign of a great soul.

It is the basis on which alone civilisation can be built. It is a gloriously constructive expression of the great Christ-like command to love one's neighbour as oneself.

But unrestricted tolerance is quite another thing.

One cannot be tolerant towards crime.

One cannot safely bear the activities of the criminal, no matter what form those activities take.

And when there is a question of truth versus error, we cannot even pretend to be tolerant.

From Tolerance to Confusion.

So tolerance may simply be a sign of mental weakness and uncertainty. Protestantism has been most intolerant toward the Catholic Church, simply because for generations the leaders of Protestantism have taught their followers a mass of scandalous lies about the teaching of the Church. And all the time these Protestants have not even been permitted to know what the Church really does teach.

Protestants have not hated the Catholic Church; they have hated the caricature of the Catholic Church that has been built up to excite them to distaste and distrust and deep enmity.

Toward the various sects within the vast hodge-podge that is Protestantism however, Protestants have come to be ridiculously tolerant. They are not sure of their own religion. They have seen so many explanations of even simple texts that no one of these explanations seems important. They have reached a point, not of tolerance, but of indifference. It doesn't much matter which of Christ's teachings you accept or deny. One, two, three, five, seven sacraments? What difference does it make?

Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Congregationalist? After all one can pass from one group to the other with scarcely the ruffling of the part in one's hair. Which of all the claimants to the name Protestant has the truth? Who can be sure? Let's be widely tolerant.

God's Truth.

But if God revealed one immutable truth, He established one Church and not a bedlam of Churches, if He traced one sure road to His eternal city and provided along that road all the aids, necessary for a safe journey and a happy arrival... ?

How can a person be tolerant towards any other truth or Church or way? Any more than an astronomer can believe that in addition to the fact that the earth moves around the sun there is perhaps the fact that the sun daily travels around the earth and the moon does a grand right-and left with the other planets?

Gentleness and Love.

In the heart of each of us there must be an abounding gentleness and love of our fellow men.

We can never for a moment allow ourselves to be tempted by the easy way of force. It seems too simple a gesture to hold a gun at an opponent's temple and say, "My truth or your life." We must remember that gentleness is the strongest force in all the world and that the patient lover of mankind is the one who in the end finds the lost sheep and brings him back to the Good Shepherd.

But now we know anew that tolerance of untruth is not expected or possible. We cannot be asked to believe that two and two make seven. We cannot be asked to admit the possibility of man's being either an animal or a soul without a body or an accident in a purposeless cosmos. We cannot be tolerant when people say that Christ was so poor an organiser that the one Church He thought He was building turned out to be a discordant babble of a thousand Churches. We cannot be acquiescent when Mohammed and Confucius and Buddha and the Saviour of the world are lumped together in one antique shop of religious dust and cobweb.

Right and Truth Prevail.

Truth is truth. One cannot be tolerant of error.

Right is right. One cannot bear willingly the clamours and claims of evil.

Christ is the Light of the World. One cannot be asked to walk in darkness.

We can be gentle and kind and loving and merciful to all, but we cannot where God's truth and man's rights and dignities are concerned be asked to be tolerant. Such tolerance is treason to God and to man.

We can have no part in it.
