

When Tolerance Doesn't Mean Toleration

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Forty years ago, the radical philosopher Herbert Marcuse penned an essay entitled “Repressive Tolerance.” In that essay Marcuse offered what has now become a familiar argument about tolerance — all opinions and belief systems should be tolerated, except those that are not uniformly tolerant.

In other words, only liberal positions and belief systems were to be tolerated, since “repressive” beliefs did not deserve toleration. So much for tolerance in toleration. Marcuse, who died in 1979, must be smiling at the statements offered by an influential Unitarian Universalist minister. Responding to Sam Harris’s book, *The End of Faith*, and his proposal that all religious belief systems are inherently dangerous, this minister proposed that religious liberty should be extended only to liberal belief systems: *So now, as freedom, reason, and tolerance are all under siege in our society, does self-preservation require religious liberals to abandon our commitment to religious tolerance?*

The Rev. Dr. William R. Murry, a leading Unitarian Universalist minister and former president of Meadville/Lombard Theological School in Chicago, says: “I get a little impatient with the concept that we should tolerate all religions because people are entitled to their own beliefs. If a religion is based on ignorance and irrationality and totalitarianism, there is no need to stand aside and pretend that that’s OK. What I would say about tolerance is that we cannot tolerate intolerance.” No wonder Murry considers The End of Faith in many ways a great book that should be widely read. “I hope it starts a nationwide conversation,” he says.

The leader of the Unitarian Universalist denomination disagrees, at least somewhat: *The Rev. William G. Sinkford, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, disagrees with Harris. To do anything other than respect the beliefs of others, even those who challenge ours, even those who challenge our right to exist, he says, would “violate our religious principles so deeply that it’s simply not an option. We have to remain as we are as a religious people. The least helpful kind of discourse is one which tries to prove who is right theologically.”*

So, Dr. Murray is open-minded enough to tolerate all open-minded positions while Rev. Sinkford is so open-minded that he finds the question of who is right theologically to be “least helpful.”

True toleration exists when all persons are free to express their own deepest beliefs and to argue for the truthfulness and superiority of their beliefs, while respecting the rights of all others to do the same. This is chartered pluralism — an honest exchange of ideas, beliefs,

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and arguments in the public square — not ideological pluralism that denies that truth can be found, or the false tolerance that tolerates only what it likes. Here is one more article for the trouble file.

SEE: Warren R. Ross, “Does Tolerance Disarm Religious Liberals?,” *Unitarian Universalist World*, August 15, 2006.

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