

# THE ILLUSION OF MORAL NEUTRALITY

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## I

Consider debate. Expressions like "my truth" and "your truth" might be ducky in singles bars and hip psychotherapy. But they will not pass muster in logic, for every proposition implies the falsehood of its contrary. If A is true, then not-A is false; if A is not *the* truth regarding these two alternatives, then to not-A the title must pass. Does this mean that if I cherish truth, I must suppress all beliefs that I consider wrong?

Consider marriage. No institution can survive the persistent disregard of the promises and principles on which it is based; yet purity of mores is a rare bloom in the weed-gardens of Babylon. If we still care about the sanctity of the marriage bed, then should we go back to making adulterers wear the scarlet A?

Finally, consider religion. Once one accepts something as the ultimate concern, whether God or some other "god," then its claims are by that fact acknowledged utterly superior to all others. They cannot be overbalanced by other scruples. If one of its claims is "Enforce the faith" and tolerance says "Refuse," then tolerance is a sin. Then was Nietzsche right that if men took God seriously, they would still be burning heretics at the stake?

Two different groups of people answer "Yes" to such questions as these. In the first group are the ordinary intolerant, whom we sometimes find among society at large. The second group is the backlash, the reaction, which we find among -- dare I say it? -- the cultural elite. My attention will be devoted to the latter. These reactionaries claim to love tolerance, but because they do not understand it they strangle it in their embrace. Their creed is that intolerance is born at the same moment as public moral commitments; that morality must therefore be a "private" affair; that in order to say that tolerance is a good, we must forbear to say aloud that anything else is good or evil. The name of their god is Neutrality. He also goes by other names, like Autonomy, and under juridical disguises, like Rights; some of these are more vogue, but Neutrality will do.

We meet this jealous and negating god on the philosophic Right, where conservatives like Michael Oakeshott tell us that the specific and limited activity of "governing" has "nothing to do" with natural law or morals. We meet this God on the philosophic Left, where liberals like John Rawls and Marxists like Jürgen Habermas invent devices like the Veil of Ignorance and the Ideal Speech Situation in order to convince us that in order to figure out the principles of justice, we

must pretend to forget not only who we are, but also everything we ever thought we knew about good and evil. We meet this god in law, where many jurists treat ethical distinctions such as "family" vs. "non-family" as "invidious classifications" that deny citizens the equal protection of the law. We meet this god in education, where elementary readers now have titles like *Daddy's Roommate*, *Heather Has Two Mommies*, and *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride*. In fact we meet this god everywhere: in the university, in the movie theatre, in many churches and synagogues, and at the even more important cultural altar of the television.

The remarkable thing is that people who insist that tolerance means moral neutrality should be so earnest in ridiculing those who aren't neutral. But it isn't really odd, because they aren't neutral either. The scandal of Neutrality is that its worshippers cannot answer the question "Why be neutral?" without committing themselves to particular goods -- social peace, self-expression, self-esteem, ethnic pride or what have you -- thereby violating their own desideratum of Neutrality. Yet even this is merely a symptom of a deeper problem: There is no such thing as Neutrality. It isn't merely unachievable, like a perfect circle; it is unthinkable and unapproachable, like a square circle. Whether we deem it better to take a stand or be silent, we've offended the god in the very act of deeming.

To see the folly of neutralism is one thing; to escape from it is another. Many who understand perfectly well that tolerance cannot be defended by suspending judgment about goods and evils have difficulty defending it in any other way. They suspect the worst: that if neutrality is a square circle, then so is tolerance, along with all of its component virtues like objectivity and fairness. They fear that by leaving the reactionaries, they will join with the ordinary intolerant.

We are right to fear this trap, but we make the difficulty of avoiding it greater than it is. Return to the three problems I posed at the outset. If I cherish truth, must I suppress the beliefs of those who are in the wrong? If I want to defend marriage, must I hector adulterers? If I take God seriously, must I burn heretics at the stake? When I posed these questions, you may have had the feeling of colossal non sequitur: that each connected a true premise with a false conclusion, a right goal with a wrong means. Suppressing mistaken beliefs, you may think, *does not advance* the truth. The hectoring of adulterers *does not make* marriages honest. Burning heretics *does not please God*. I believe this intuition of non sequitur is the heart of the matter of tolerance. It merely needs to be spelled out a little more clearly. But to do that, we have to go back to our ABCs.

## II

With apologies to Cole Porter: What is this thing called tolerance? What does it demand of us? What do we need in order to get it? Let's see if we can work this out. One thing,

anyway, is clear, and that is that tolerance has to do with tolerating. So let's begin there. What does it mean -- to tolerate?

Well, we already know the answer to *that*, don't we? To tolerate something is to put up with it even though we might be tempted to suppress it. Are we all right there? Next step, then: which things are we tempted to suppress? We know the answer here, too: We are tempted to suppress the things that we deem mistaken, painful, wrong, harmful, offensive, or in some other way unworthy of approval.

Now wait a minute. Why is this a *temptation*? We use that term when our hearts solicit us to do what we ought not do or to forbear from doing what we ought to do. But *shouldn't* we suppress the things that we deem mistaken, painful, wrong, harmful, offensive and so on? The answer is: Sometimes we should, and sometimes we shouldn't. For instance, it's certainly not right to put up with the act of rape. But it is right to put up with the profession, by rational argument, of opinions that we deem mistaken.

Why are these two cases different? In one respect, of course, they are just the same. Whichever we endeavored to suppress -- rape, or the profession of false opinions -- we would presumably be trying to avert particular evils; or, if you would rather put it this way, to protect particular goods. What goods? The goods that are injured in the act of rape include the dignity of the woman, her physical and emotional well-being, and the integrity of a certain pattern of relationships between men and women, a pattern that depends on trust rather than fear. Likewise the goods that are injured in the act of professing false opinions include the clear knowledge of the truth, the public recognition of its value, and the integrity of a certain pattern of conduct, a pattern that depends on right judgment rather than error. By suppressing rape we would be trying to protect the first set of goods; by suppressing the profession of false opinions, the latter.

And so it is with every case. People may not *agree* about what is good and what is evil; they may be *mistaken* about what is good and what is evil; they may even call evil, good, and *good*, evil. But every time someone wants to suppress something, we can be sure it is to prevent something that is thought, rightly or wrongly, to be evil; alternately, to protect something that is thought, rightly or wrongly, to be good.

So we ask again: If, in all cases where we are tempted to suppress, we are trying to prevent evils or protect goods, then why do we ever resist the temptation? Perhaps it isn't a true temptation, but a counsel of wisdom. Why *do* we sometimes tolerate an evil? Why *do* we sometimes put up with an injury to a good?

The reason is not skepticism, as some people hold. To see why not we'll glance at debate, a practice notorious for tolerating the evil of false opinions. Where do skeptics stand on this?

There are three cases: the utter skeptic, who doubts all things; the partial skeptic, who doubts some things; and the non-skeptic, who doubts nothing whatsoever. Case one. Can the utter skeptic say "Because all is in doubt, all should be heard"? No, he has to say this: "The rightness of hearing and the rightness of silencing are equally in doubt; I cannot tell you which to choose." Case two. Can the partial skeptic say "I don't believe in debate"? Yes, but he might instead say this: "I am in doubt about what is true in general. But I'm sure that truth is good, I'm sure that exchange of discursive reasoning will help to find it, and I'm sure about the kind of manners that such exchange requires." Case three. Can the non-skeptic say "To put up with falsehood is wrong"? Yes, but he might instead say this: "Although I am sure of every truth, one such truth is that the exercise of rebutting error will sharpen the insight I already possess, and another is that it may convert my opponent." We see that only the non-skeptic and the partial skeptic can deal with debate. Neither does it because of what he doubts; each does it because of what he doesn't doubt. In our example, each tolerates falsehood for the sake of truth.

Once we see this, the real reason that we sometimes tolerate evils or put up with injuries to good becomes clear: We do it to prevent graver evils, or to advance greater goods. For there is a certain paradox in this business of suppressing evils. The paradox is that *the act of suppression itself* may give rise to evils. In fact it often does. Because this is true, we must always put the two evils in a scale -- I mean the evil that suppression engenders and the evil that it prevents. When the evil that suppression engenders equals, or exceeds, the evil that it prevents, we ought to put up with the thing in question instead of suppressing it.

I've called this a paradox. It is the paradox on which the virtue of tolerance is founded. But when we look at the matter closely we see that there are two cases, in one of which the paradox is even more pronounced than in the other.

The less paradoxical case is when the goods that are protected by suppression and injured by suppression are different. For example, at the same time that we consider suppressing the profession of false opinions for the sake of truth, we might consider tolerating their profession for the sake of peace. Truth and peace are both goods, but of course they are not the same good. First we have to decide which of the two goods is of higher order, because that one trumps the other. If they are of the same order, then we must resort to judgments of degree. One need not suppose that judgment has mathematical precision; only that there is such a thing as judgment.

In the other, the more paradoxical case, the goods that are protected by suppression and the goods that are injured by suppression are not different, but the same. For example, at the same time that we consider suppressing the profession of false opinions for the sake of truth, we might consider tolerating their profession -- at least their profession by rational argument -- but also for the sake of truth. On the side of suppression we might plead, "After all, the opinions in question *are false*, aren't they? Then isn't it a gain to get rid of them?" But on the side of toleration, we

might ask, "But what better engine have we for *honing* truth than to try it against error in a fair fight?" In this case we don't have to decide which of two goods is of higher order, because there is only one good at issue. But we do have to compare different hypotheses about what really promotes that good.

Each of these cases reveals a different element in the practice of tolerance: the first, in which the good that suppression protects is different than the one that it injures, holds up *right judgment in the protection of greater ends against lesser ends*; the second, in which the goods protected by suppression and injured by suppression are the same, holds up *right judgment in the protection of ends against mistaken means*.

But element two goes more to the heart of the matter. With which other ends a given end comes into conflict is largely a matter of circumstances. By which means a given end cannot, by its nature, be pursued, is a constant.

If the constant element in the practice of tolerance is right judgment in the protection of ends against mistaken means, then the constant element in intolerance is *false* judgment in the protection of ends against mistaken means. Right away we see that intolerance shows itself in two different ways, for we can err in either of two different directions.

One way that we can err is by an excess of indulgence -- putting up with something we should suppress. Let's call this the error of *softheadedness*. The other way that we can err is by a deficiency of indulgence -- suppressing what we should put up with. Let's call this the error of *narrowmindedness*. Each of these two opposite errors is a deviation from true tolerance; each of them therefore has the same claim to the title, "intolerance."

I realize that this way of speaking may seem peculiar. The reason is that for some silly reason, our language reserves the term "intolerance" for narrowmindedness. Courage is easier than tolerance to talk about; although we do sometimes forget that rashness as well as cowardice is opposed to true courage, at least we aren't burdened by a term, say "in-courage," that could be applied only to cowardice and not to rashness. It seems that either we *prefer* the error of softheadedness to the error of narrowmindedness, or else we don't realize that softheadedness is an error at all. But this is a deep confusion. It is just as much a deviation from true tolerance to put up with rape as it is to suppress the profession of false opinions by rational argument.

Now let's think a little further. We've identified three possibilities: two kinds of wrong judgment in the protection of ends against mistaken means, and one kind of right judgment in the protection of ends against mistaken means. It's as though we had drawn three points floating in space. Of course there is a flaw in this mental diagram. We need to arrange our three points

along a *continuum* bounded by two extremes: one excessive, one deficient; one softheaded, the other narrowminded; the extreme of one vice, and the extreme of the other.

Why must we do this? Because just how indulgent we are toward something -- just how much we put up with it -- just where we fall between the two extremes -- is a matter of degree. For instance, we might make some act a crime. Or we might shun those who do it, but without going so far as to criminalizing. Or we might try to persuade them to change their ways, but without going so far as to shunning. Or we might ignore them. Or we might encourage them. We might even reward them. The truly tolerant point will always be somewhere between the two endpoints, its location depending on the act in question and on the circumstances. But precisely where it is along this line will vary. The location of true tolerance can be determined only by the exercise of *case by case judgment* about the goods and the evils involved. Just as true courage is a mean between rashness and cravenness, and true friendliness is a mean between obsequiousness and boorishness, so true tolerance is a mean between softheadedness and narrowmindedness.

We have now got the first sketch of an answer to the question of what tolerance is. If what we have said so far is correct, then we can offer the following propositions.

- 1 Tolerance cannot be neutral about what is good, for its very purpose is to guard goods and avert evils. This solves the problem with which we began.
- 2 Tolerance is neither a moral rule, a moral attitude, a moral feeling, nor a moral capacity, but a moral virtue. Further, although tolerance is not one of the moral virtues that Aristotle discussed, it is a moral virtue of the Aristotelian type. For like the moral virtues that he did discuss, it is a mean between two opposed vices, one of them characterized by excess and the other by deficiency, its location to be discovered by the case-by-case exercise of practical wisdom.
- 3 The circumstantial element in the practice of tolerance is right judgment in the protection of greater ends against lesser ends. This is no different than any exercise of practical wisdom. However, its constant element is right judgment in the protection of ends against mistaken means. This makes it a special case.

To be sure, this is only a *formal* answer to the question of what tolerance is. It directs us toward the exercise of practical wisdom -- of well-founded judgment about the goods and evils involved in putting up with things. To give a *substantive* answer to the question of what tolerance is, I would have to *supply* this practical wisdom; I would have to tell what is good. Even if I had all that wisdom I couldn't supply it in 6,000 words.

Still, the formal definition of tolerance does do certain work for us. For instance:

- The fact that tolerance is a moral virtue of the Aristotelian type tells us a great deal about its relation to the others. For those of us who wonder how, if anyhow, tolerance might be taught, this relation carries powerful implications.
- For the reason suggested earlier, religion presents the acid test for tolerance. For the loyalty that it concerns is ultimate; if tolerance cannot survive it, then tolerance cannot survive. However, the special role of tolerance in protecting ends against mistaken means gives us the one clue we need to unscrew this inscrutable.

Explaining the first of these two points is the burden of the next short section. Explaining the second is the burden of the last.

### III

Moral virtues -- all of them, I think, but if not all, then at least those of the Aristotelian type -- are interdependent. The classical demonstration of this fact, which derives from Thomas Aquinas, pivots on their relation with practical wisdom. Reduced to its essentials, it works like this. Every moral virtue depends on practical wisdom. Hence if practical wisdom is impaired, then every moral virtue is impaired. But practical wisdom depends on every moral virtue. Hence if any moral virtue is impaired, practical wisdom is impaired. It follows that, through practical wisdom, a flaw in any moral virtue entails a flaw in every other.

That explanation is a little dense; let's expand it. To see how every moral virtue depends on practical wisdom, think of the virtue of courage. Courage involves a mean between fear and daring: as we said before, enough fear to avoid being rash, enough daring to avoid being craven. But because the right amount of fear and daring varies from case to case, the habit of courage must be informed by practical wisdom. So far, so good. But how about the reverse -- how does practical wisdom depend on every moral virtue? Think again of courage. In thinking of its exercises our imaginations usually go no farther than pain and death. Aristotle himself thought no evil could be greater. But this is false: contempt is more fearful, and vice certainly ought to be. Now consider. To achieve practical wisdom, one needs fear enough to be vigilant of error and daring enough to risk it in pursuit of truth. To hold onto it, one needs fear enough to dread its loss and daring enough to risk contempt. But to say this is as much as to say that just as courage depends on practical wisdom, practical wisdom depends on courage. That is what we sought to prove.

A little thought will show that the same relation exists between practical wisdom and every other moral virtue. Using a bicycle wheel as our model, the moral virtues are to spokes as practical wisdom is to the hub. I like this picture because it is fertile as well as accurate. We all

know what happens when we use a bicycle wheel with a damaged spoke. Before long the others give in too, and the wheel gets more and more out of true. This is the classical thesis of the *unity of the virtues*. If one virtue bends, then every virtue bends.

Everyday experience proves this even more quickly than Thomas Aquinas did. We don't even have to go through the hub, for without implying their equality we may say that all the moral virtues are connected at the rim. Tolerance is addled in the unfriendly man; friendship is addled in the dishonest man; honesty is addled in the unjust man; justice is addled in the loveless man; love is addled in the hopeless man; hope is addled in the impatient man; and patience is addled in the intolerant man. So the wheel is closed. All of the virtues are joined, all are part of the web. A touch on any thread makes the whole web shake.

We've made two points here. The first is that tolerance is one of the moral virtues; the second, that it depends on all the rest of them. These points have penetrating implications for the cultivation of tolerant citizens.

How so? The unity of the virtues works in only one direction. Impairment of one moral virtue entails impairment of all the rest; *progress* toward one moral virtue does *not* entail progress toward all the rest. Think of the bicycle wheel again. Beginning with a perfect round, bending one spoke will soon bend all the others too. But beginning with a crushed wheel, *straightening* one spoke will *not* soon pull the others back in true. In fact it may cause some spokes to bend even more. With damaged bicycle wheels, there are three alternatives. We can replace the wheel; we can take it apart, straighten each part separately, and put it back together; or we can leave it in one piece and straighten every part at once. With a soul, the first two alternatives are out of the question because we can neither replace it nor take it apart. The only alternative is to leave it in one piece and straighten every part at once.

Here is what follows: if all of the virtues depend on one another, then tolerance cannot be taught unless all the rest are taught as well. We cannot compensate for the collapse of all our virtues by teaching tolerance and letting the rest go by, as some educators and social critics seem to think; the only cure for moral collapse is moral renewal, on all fronts simultaneously.

That is a hard adage. For even with crushed wheels, the simultaneous straightening of every spoke is hardly thinkable. With crushed souls -- which is what we all are -- we've no idea how our own efforts might bring it to pass. More than education, we need redemption. For virtues are complicated things: complex dispositions of character, deeply ingrained "habits," by which one calls upon all of his passions and capacities of mind in just those ways that aid, prompt, focus, inform, and execute his moral choices instead of clouding them, misleading them, or obstructing their execution. This means that virtues cannot be imparted just by encouraging



certain feelings or developing certain capacities; feelings and capacities are the equipment of the virtues, not their fulfillment.

Again, virtues are much more than readiness to follow the rules. There are, of course, some rules that are true in all circumstances. Murder is always wrong. But virtues are more like a fitness to distinguish true rules from false, and to choose rightly even where there are no rules or where the rules that are known are rules of thumb that seem to contradict each other. To be sure, if rules are applied judiciously they can help to restrain the most obvious evils. And this must help in the nurture of virtue. But virtue cannot be taught simply through an exhaustive list of the various and sundry rules to which it prompts obedience. Not only would the list be endless, but the vicious would rebel before we even reached the second page.

In sum, we aren't going to transmit the virtue of tolerance through a quick fix, like a Freshman Orientation Weekend; through a long fix, like a three-volume set of workplace sensitivity regulations; or through a false fix, like a Children of the Rainbow Curriculum. If Plato was right that justice is medicine for the soul, then these sorts of thing are its patent medicine: five percent poison, ten percent flavoring, eighty-five percent intoxicating spirits, and pure delusion from the first to the last.

#### IV

I've commended rules while stressing virtues. But for the rest of this essay, forget the virtues. I am about to discuss religious tolerance, where the rules themselves are hard enough to discern.

What *is* religion, anyway? I am not asking about true religion -- just religion.

Some people say that all of the religions depend on faith, while all of the secularisms depend on reason. But as Chesterton remarked in *Orthodoxy*, "It is idle to talk always of the alternative of reason and faith. Reason is itself a matter of faith. It is an act of faith to assert that our thoughts have any relation to reality at all." Other people say that all of the religions believe in God, while all of the secularisms do not. But though Buddhists do not believe in God, yet we call Buddhism a religion. Still others, like Tillich and Niebuhr, hold the mark of religion to be the practice of *ultimate concern* that orders all other concerns, *unconditioned loyalty* that trumps all other loyalties. Here, I think, we finally hit the mark. For Christians the ultimate concern is the saving God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who has revealed himself in Messiah. Though Buddhists do not believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, much less in Messiah, they do have an ultimate concern -- escape from suffering, inherent in desire, which springs in turn (they hold) from the illusion of existence.

But if religion is the practice of ultimate concern, then we have another problem. In the first place, even a secularism may be the practice of an ultimate concern. We acknowledge this by calling Leninism a religion; likewise when we say of a greedy man that "his god is money" and when we call misplaced devotion "idolatry." In the second place, even among those secularisms that do *not* go so far as to identify ultimate concerns, none is without implications as to what *could* or *could not* count as an ultimate concern. John Stuart Mill could never decide which, if any, of the "permanent interests of man as a progressive being" was deserving of unconditioned loyalty. But he was sure that Messiah was not among them.

What all this tells us is that "religious" and "secular" constitute a false dichotomy. We would do better with a trichotomy. An *acknowledged* religion like Christianity or Buddhism posits an ultimate concern and admits it. An *unacknowledged* religion like Leninism posits an ultimate concern but denies that so doing is religious. And an *incomplete* religion like Millianism has not finished ranking its concerns.

Incomplete religion can live only in the dreamworld of thought. In the light of day it must become complete or die. For in every life or way of life -- whether lived simply, lived with the guidance of an ethical theory, or even lived in defiance of an ethical theory -- given enough time, some concern eventually emerges as paramount. Some consideration eventually is put before all others. Eventually there is something to which, or some direction in which, every knee in the personality bows. This is the person's god. As a matter of theory, one may deny that any concern deserves ultimacy. But as a matter of practice, no one escapes ceding ultimacy to something, whether it deserves this or not. Choices between incompatible urgencies are unavoidable. To prevent the rise of some one of these urgencies to supremacy, a person would have practice a truly Stoic discipline of contradiction, and in the end we would have to ask what urgency he served in so disordering himself. In short, one need not be conscious of one's god, or even conscious that one has a god. One might think one has no god, or that one is "looking for" or "waiting for" a god. One may even be converted from one god to another. But one will have a god -- or at least, one will be on the road to one.

With all of this ultimate concern about, how can there be religious tolerance at all? There *can't* be -- unless one's ultimate concern commands it, or at least allows it; for in this case and this case alone, tolerance of other claimants to ultimacy is obedience to one's own. We have returned to the point made earlier, that the constant element in the practice of tolerance is right judgment in the protection of ends against mistaken means.

Thus St. Hilary of Poitiers: "God does not want unwilling worship, nor does He require a forced repentance." The idea is that although God demands and deserves our unconditioned loyalty, He is of such a nature that nothing exacted by threats could truly serve Him. For He desires sons and daughters, not slaves: His love is inexorable and consumes everything contrary

to itself. This is not the Kantian idea that choice is lovable, but the Christian idea that love is chosen. I do not say that His supposed followers have always practiced the loving tolerance He demands. I do say that intolerance stands under his judgment.

But notice: the same consuming fire that for its own sake demands tolerance, for its own sake sets the limits to what is tolerated. If Hilary was right that God does not want unwilling worship, then Hilary's tolerance must be absolute with respect to permitting belief in other gods. This does not mean permitting every act of service to these gods. Hilary must claim the right to say that there are evil services which nothing deserving of unconditioned loyalty could demand, and the correlative right to try to stop anyone who attempts them. For instance, whatever claims of conscience Hilary may honor he cannot permit a person to plead them in justification of murder. "God told me to kill anyone who got in my way" cuts no ice with him; nor is the case different when other ultimate concerns, other gods, are pleaded in place of God. The Defense of the Revolution, The Greater Good of the Whole, The Purity of the Race, the Hunger of Molech, the Right to Control One's Body -- neither these nor any other claimants to ultimacy are accepted as justifying the sacrifice of innocents. "Even conceding your God-given right to be left alone by me in your honor to another god," I imagine Hilary saying, "that right concerns your own soul only. I will not permit you, in its service, to inflict injuries which my own God abhors and forbids."

My example is Christian because I am a Christian. But the logic works just the same if you posit some other ultimate concern, some other god than mine. For instance, the god of the Benthamite utilitarian is "aggregate pleasure." Hence if the Benthamite could tolerate other creeds at all, such tolerance would be both ordained and limited by the requirements of such pleasure. Likewise, religious tolerance for the Millian utilitarian would be both ordained and limited by the nature of man's "permanent interests" as a "progressive being," and religious tolerance for the Leninist they would be both ordained and limited by the needs of "proletarian dictatorship."

One might suppose that this logic works only for so-called teleological creeds, said to give priority to achieving the good over doing the right. This is not so. No recent writer has more sternly insisted on the priority of right over good than John Rawls. Yet even he has an ultimate concern. This concern is "autonomy," the conditions for the realization of which are supposedly determined by choices made behind a Veil of Ignorance that obliterates personal memory. But the conclusion is obvious: For the Rawlsian, religious tolerance is both ordained and limited by what people could want who no longer remembered the love of God.

Where does all this leave us? The bottom line is that Neutrality is no more coherent in the matter of religious tolerance than it is in tolerance of any other sort. What you can tolerate pivots on your ultimate concern. Because different ultimate concerns ordain different zones of tolerance, social consensus is possible only at the points where these zones overlap. Note well: The greater the resemblance of contending concerns, the greater the overlap of their zones of tolerance. The

less the resemblance of contending concerns, the less the overlap of their zones of tolerance. Should contending concerns become sufficiently unlike, their zones of tolerance no longer intersect at all. Consensus vanishes.

This, I believe, is our current trajectory. The embattled description "culture war" is not inflammatory; it is merely exact. And we can expect the war to grow worse. The reason is that our various gods ordain not only different zones of tolerance, but different norms to regulate the dispute among themselves. Although the God of some of the disputants ordains that they love and persuade their opponents, the gods of some of the others ordain no such thing.