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Tolerance: Virtue or Vice?

WHEN OSWALD SPENGLER published his multi-volume study, *The Decline of the West* (1926-28), few outside professional academic circles took the epitaph seriously. Today no reflective scholar doubts that in this century a major cultural shift has taken place, one that has eclipsed the spiritual resources which historically animated the West. As a philosopher of history, Spengler drew from his study of the past the pessimistic conclusion that the West has not only peaked but also faces a period of irreversible decline. It is well known that for more than 200 years the Western intellectual tradition has been subjected to the nihilistic criticism of forces launched by the so-called "Enlightenment." The eighteenth-century Anglo-French and German repudiation of the classical and Christian sources of Western culture was slowly to have political and cultural consequences, consequences we now experience in the social order.

Without fully accepting the reasons advanced by Spengler, are we driven to his pessimistic conclusion? Perhaps not. In any event realism demands that intellectually we face the many formidable obstacles impeding a return to the moral and intellectual resources which pre-

vailed during the founding of our republic. Any effort to recapture the moral tradition that shaped the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution is handicapped by the current propensity to regard all moral claims as equal. The concept of "procedural democracy," now regnant in Western intellectual circles, militates against the government's casting its weight behind any one conception of the good. The state according to this mode of thinking must remain neutral before competing moral claims, favoring none. No moral system can claim superiority, it is argued, since each is merely the product of its time- and place-bound preferences of people advancing it.

This doctrine itself is supported by two ancillary principles, one, the seemingly innocent call for "tolerance," and the other, the malevolent doctrine of "separation of church and state." The principle of tolerance augers against an unabashed defense of one's own tradition, whereas the separation principle surrenders moral authority to the state or, worse still, is employed to eradicate religion from both the academy and the public square.

Calls for tolerance abound, from pa-

pal statements to European conferences. Bumper stickers and postal imprints proclaim its value. One can understand John Paul II's seeking tolerance for a Christian minority living amongst a largely Hindu population, but one is mystified by an apparent campaign for tolerance in the open societies of Western Europe and North America.

Considered abstractly, it would be easier to make the case that tolerance is a vice than to justify its putative status as a virtue. To employ a few homey examples: a parent cannot tolerate disobedience in the child; a teacher, sloppy homework or cheating on an examination; a military officer, insubordination; a CEO, deviance from company policy; or an ecclesiastical body, divergent doctrinal teaching or liturgical practice within its ranks. No state can tolerate irresponsible fiscal policy, nor can any state permit disrespect for its laws. An entity must preserve its unity to preserve its very being.

The promotion of the notion that tolerance is a virtue is of relatively recent origin. Tolerance is not mentioned as a virtue by Aristotle or by the Stoics. Nor does St. Thomas Aquinas speak of tolerance as a virtue. To the contrary, Roget's venerable *English Language Dictionary of Synonyms and Antonyms* gives the following as synonyms for tolerance: leniency, clemency, indulgence, laxity, sufferance, concession, and permissiveness—terms generally regarded as designating questionable behavior.

Of course, certain technical meanings of the term may be identified. "Tolerance" in biology is the ability of an organism to endure contact with a substance or its introduction into the body without ill effects. "Tolerance" in the industrial order is the range within which a dimension of a machined part may vary. "Religious tolerance," which many have in mind when they use the term, is the intellectual and practical acknowledg-

ment of the right of others to live in accordance with religious beliefs different from one's own.

Religious tolerance, though not confined to Christianity, seems to have a particular appeal to the Christian conscience. Perhaps it does so for reasons intrinsic to Christianity itself. The classical and biblical sources of Western civilization, although under attack for the past 200 years, still remain the basis of Western culture. That said, it must be acknowledged that its respect for intellect, for the rule of law, for the rational foundation of religious faith is not characteristic of all who would seek to have their views tolerated. If the classical and biblical heritage of the West is not at least respected by all who seek its shelter, can those institutions and freedoms grounded in it survive? The call for a tolerance that ignores or abuses those cultural foundations is inconsistent and self-destructive of its own warrant. Is it not incumbent upon the West to defend its intellectual and cultural patrimony while yet accommodating the other?

Throughout history, political entities have recognized the need for unity of outlook among their peoples. At times in classical Greece and Rome, atheism could be punished by death. Modern socialist regimes, whenever they come to power, recognizing the influence of ideas, work to suppress religious education, if not religion itself. Within the Western democracies practical accommodation is one thing, but a nonjudgmental, nondiscriminating acceptance is another. How tolerant can a society be and yet maintain itself in existence? Of course, where nothing is prized, everything can be tolerated.

Those who advocate tolerance must first establish the context in which it should be recognized and its limits. It is better to designate clearly an objective than to reify an abstraction. There are times when leadership must insist on

propriety, on respect of the inherited, and on the rule of law. In short, context determines whether tolerance is a virtue or vice.

Procedural democracy as currently defended in academic circles rests upon the assumption that there is no way to determine the common good. The state in adopting its policies is not to draw upon any one moral tradition, certainly not on one advanced from a religious perspective or by an ecclesial body. Religion is a purely private or subjective affair, not a trustworthy source of principles applicable to public policy. In this context the separation doctrine is often invoked, but that doctrine is not found in the U.S. Constitution. It is rather the construct of a maverick interpretation of the U.S. Supreme Court acquiescing to the secular humanists who vigorously lobbied the Court.

Any student of the American founding will recognize that the Constitution in its First Amendment sought only to prevent an established church for the nation as a whole and did not intend to undo establishment in the colonies where it prevailed. It does not take much research to discover that at the outbreak of the American Revolution there were established churches in nine of the thirteen colonies. At the time of the founding the positive role of religion in society was simply taken for granted. It was commonly recognized that man is by nature a spiritual and a material being and that government should not impede growth in either domain.

As a principle religious tolerance prevails throughout the West, but the battle to shape the common mind has been shifted from the pulpit to the classroom. While John Locke, David Hume, and Adam Smith favored religious establishment, their contemporary disciples in like manner are in the forefront of those who would give the state exclusive control over education. Whereas David Hume

maintained that "The union of civil and ecclesiastical power serves extremely, in even civilized government, to the maintenance of peace and order," and William Blackstone, too, held that uniformity in religious matters is a civic good, contemporary defenders of establishment have shifted their focus to the control of education, denying parents an equal footing in choosing the education of their children. In the name of separating church and state, the choice of a religiously informed education is rendered difficult if not impossible for most at the crucial primary and secondary levels.

Unfortunately with the dismissal of religion often goes that other support of republican government, the classical learning which informed the political philosophy of the Founding Fathers. At the time of the American founding, Cicero's discourses framed the issues, which were addressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, topics such as liberty, the nature and source of law, the common good, security, patriotism, toleration, and the role of religion in society. Eighteenth-century readers understood Cicero to be a defender of rectitude, virtue, conservative customs, and the indispensable role which religion plays in fostering these values.

For Cicero, the highest aim of the ruler is the security and welfare of the community because the common welfare is the indispensable condition for personal advancement. Security justifies the use of force against aggressors, but the maintenance of morality in the populace is also a fundamental responsibility of the ruler. The ruler, of necessity, must be able to distinguish between what is truly good (the *bonum honestum*) and what is merely expedient (the *bonum utile*). Cicero acknowledges that from one point of view, the pursuit of the *bonum honestum* is but a means for the realization of the common good in which it finds

its purpose and limit; this makes *honestum* a form of *utile*. But Cicero also identifies *honestum* with the common good and *utile* with individual interest. To what extent, then, is the common good to be pursued against the interest of the individual?

This is the issue which confronts policy makers throughout the West. No ancient text can provide a ready answer to contemporary problems, yet the ancients can speak to us across the ages about human fulfillment and the ends of government. At a time when the West seems to be in a period of moral and cultural decline, despite unprecedented material achievement, it is not unwise to study the sources of our founding. Livy recommended much the same for his period when he wrote of a failing Rome:

I invite the reader's attention to the much more serious consideration of the kind of lives our ancestors lived, of who were the

men and what the means, both in politics and war, by which Rome's power was first acquired and subsequently expanded. I would have him trace the processes of our moral decline, to watch first the sinking of the foundations of morality as the old teaching was allowed to lapse, then the final collapse of the whole edifice, and the dark dawning of our modern day when we can neither endure our vices nor face the remedies needed to cure them.

Respect for ancestry, heritage, or tradition determines concretely the emphasis placed on the study of history, languages, art, and on the observance of religious and civic ritual. Failure to appreciate and to defend the uniqueness of our moral and spiritual traditions or in the name of tolerance to treat them as only one among many can only end as Spengler predicted in the suicide of the West.

—Jude P. Dougherty