

human goodness that still longs for the virtues of Faith, Hope, and Love, not to mention the classical virtues of Prudence, Justice, Temperance, and Fortitude, all of which are vital to human flourishing.

Indeed, without them, who are we? Stooges of the *Zeitgeist*, perhaps, condemned to a paltry freedom rich in "consumer choices" and "lifestyle choices" but poor in duty, binding relationships, and the wisdom of tradition.

1. Allan Carlson, "Toward a Family-Centered Economy," *New Oxford Review* (December 1997), 28-35.

## ***The Dogma of Toleration***

GEORGE A. PANICHAS

**The Long Truce: How Toleration Made the World Safe for Power and Profit**, by A. J. Conyers, Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 2001. *xiv + 266 pp.*

PROFESSOR A. J. CONYERS, in this scrupulous and penetrating monograph, examines "the modern idea of toleration" as it has developed and ramified to problematic socio-political levels over the past four centuries. In particular he tries to show, philosophically and historically, how the theory of toleration is tied to the rise of the modern nation-states in Western Europe, Great Britain, and North America. He also seeks to weigh the consequences of the imposed expansion of this phenomenon, which he sees both in its destructive uses and in its good and true practices. He maintains that the prin-

ciple of toleration, though long exploited and abused from an ideological perspective, can still be rescued and restored "as something both useful and timely." The main critical pivot of Conyers's book is found in this statement from his preface: "The movement toward strong centralized governments was accompanied by a sustained secularization of public life and a trend toward relaxing...moral discipline." Central to this movement and to its reformulated list of collectivist virtues is "the strategy of toleration" that seeks to impose harmony and unity in an increasingly centralized political society of the modern world.

Toleration is seen here as a modern doctrine based largely on the love of power, or to invoke here Conyers's subtitle, "How toleration made the world safe for power and profit." Conyers portrays, in convincing ways, and with admirable subtlety of observation and argument, the distortions and deformations committed in the name of toleration. In this respect, Conyers's including as an epigraph this statement by Dietrich Bonhoeffer has its implicit relevance in understanding the ethos and the thrust of *The Long Truce*: "Whenever the state becomes the executor of all the vital and cultural activities of man, it forfeits its own proper dignity, its specific authority as government." Certainly, Bonhoeffer's words help us to recognize the results of the idea of toleration as it has progressively defined "the centralized large states and its bipolar vision of society." Toleration, in short, has been cleverly annexed by an empiricist grouping of theorists to create a new moral order by being masked as something sacred. Conyers's study meticulously traces the stages and the methods by which toleration has become, since the sixteenth century, a powerful strategic weapon in gaining pragmatic goals that have a non-religious and even an anti-religious nature. Conyers reveals how this weapon has

---

GEORGE A. PANICHAS is the editor of *Modern Age* and author, most recently, of *The Critical Legacy of Irving Babbitt* (ISI Books, 1999).

metamorphosed in religious tradition and character by unilaterally replacing religious virtues with secular virtues.

This long process, secular and profane, has over the centuries been stamped indelibly by the forces steadfastly hostile to Jewish-Christian tenets and claims. Only in modern times do we find the idea of toleration dominating public policy and also public philosophy. The ancient church, particularly among the Alexandrian Christians and the Cappadocian Fathers, emphasized the biblical tradition of toleration. Indeed, long before the Enlightenment, as Conyers contends, there existed an unusual openness counseled by a Justin Martyr (d. 165) and a Clement of Alexandria (150?-215?). Thus, Justin Martyr, an influential philosopher and Christian convert in his time, displayed extraordinary openness to "Christians before Christ," for example, the Stoics and the Platonists. And Clement did much in the church to lessen the fear of pagan intellectual achievements. Unlike the modern uses of toleration as a doctrine, in early Christianity toleration was a dynamic practice and attitude that transculturally "left the lines of communication open among believing and thinking communities."

When we stop, then, to contrast the distinction between the practice of toleration in antiquity and the later modern doctrine of toleration, we can begin to distinguish between toleration steeped in a spiritual standard and the modern view of toleration as a prescriptive virtue defined and ordained by exclusively social, economic, and political agendas. That is to say, toleration which is tied to ultimate meaning is manipulated so as to accommodate political power and material profit. A singular strength of Conyers's book is its ability to demonstrate how the modern idea of toleration, in form and genesis, evolved in an inherently ideological sense that superseded

the religious sense, or as Conyers expresses it with admirable succinctness: "Toleration was a way of setting aside, as strictly private, the difficult metaphysical and theological dimensions of public life."

Conyers's review of some of the early theorists of toleration is especially illuminating in showing how traditional metaphysics was shunted aside, with the notion of a moral aim being replaced by absolutist intentions and practices, and by an emphasis on the sovereign power of the state. Thus, Thomas Hobbes's writings are pointed to as representative of the growing ascendancy of the modern spirit with its practical aims and reliance on power over things. "No commentator on political goals," Conyers writes, "has been cleverer than Hobbes [1588-1679] nor more reliable in revealing the mind behind modern politics. For Hobbes makes it transparent that the new principle of political order is not so much justice, or even peace, as it is the *libido dominandi* of the emerging modern state." In short, the Permanent Things, it can be said, are savagely questioned in the wake of the profound philosophical transformation now taking place, as the civil order and in turn the moral order are viewed as an artifice and not as a reflection of the metaphysical order of existence.

Pierre Bayle is another seventeenth-century philosopher, whose three-volume *Philosophical Commentary* (1686) established him as a formulator of the doctrine of toleration, who goes even beyond Hobbes in arguing that the individual conscience has a stronger hold on the soul than any collective obligations. In this idea, as Conyers notes, we find the beginnings of the modern mentality and of the belief that the "erring conscience" must be accorded rights, in effect placing private conscience above the wisdom of the community. In his willingness, too, to sacrifice religious authority to the authority of the state, Bayle was to

defend and to advance the idea of political sovereignty. In any case, Bayle was to play an influential role in the emergence of toleration as a virulent ideology.

Perhaps the most influential philosopher associated with the doctrine of toleration is the author of the famous *Letter on Toleration* (1689), John Locke, the subject of a long and probing chapter in *The Long Truce*. This chapter epitomizes Conyers's exemplary thoroughness in his analysis of toleration in direct relation to modern nationalism as a state of mind and cultural reality, which, according to the late Robert A. Nisbet, "cannot be understood except in terms of the weakening and destruction of early bonds, and of the attachment to the political state of new emotional loyalties and identifications." Locke defended his views of toleration on the basis of pragmatism; his position, which was to place him squarely within the trend of the seventeenth century in linking state sovereignty to individual rights, was to be continued and amplified by the utilitarian philosopher John Stuart Mill in the nineteenth century and by the American pragmatist John Dewey in the twentieth century. Locke's profound influence endures to this day in our institutions, and in our understanding of the nature of community life. "Locke's toleration," writes Conyers, "plays a part in giving birth to an unarticulated society as a mass society. Toleration in its modern form is the solvent that dissolves the bonds of interdependency."

The concluding three chapters of *The Long Truce*—"The Shadow Leviathan," "Nihilism and the Catholic Vision," "High Tolerance"—contain Conyers's contemplations on the modern idea of tolerance as ultimately a "clever new disguise for persecution and a new language for social conformity." Readers will find that these contemplations conduce a reconsideration of the history and the ends of toleration. Even confirmed political lib-

erals and radicals will be forced to confront head-on some of the questions that Conyers ponders with distinct courage of judgment. Indeed, one must also hope that any person in a position of intellectual and political leadership will want to respond to Conyers's contemplations and, in fact, be troubled and challenged by the urgency of their import and the sincerity of their conviction. Contemplations like these are now rarely encountered either in the academy or in sociopolitical discussions, and they make us acutely aware of how impoverished Americans are in responding to issues of paramount significance. They are contemplations that also ennoble the function of dissent in a democratic society often intolerant of the value of dissent.

Above all, Conyers enables us to see just how the development of toleration invites, ironically, not toleration but persecution when the idea of toleration is tied to the idea of progress as dictated by pragmatic and utilitarian goals willfully separated from any conception of a final cause (*telos*) or of a guiding religio-ethical process. From Hobbes to Dewey, as Conyers shows, what has happened in modern thought is a sharp declension of "the notion of a goal as a point of reference." Motion, change, flux, action, not rest and reflection, are the heart-words of modern secular existence. Left behind, hence, "by the bare-bones world of Newtonian cosmology and Baconian science," is a sense of the world that included "not only the object available to the immediate senses but also its *intention*, its purpose, its *telos*, and therefore its *value* in a sense more significant than personal preference." Such a world, Conyers reminds us, "included more than bodies affected by material and efficient causes, but things and persons occupying a place within an articulated hierarchy and within providential anticipations."

Conyers's diagnosis of a world in which modern man must determine his own

meaning manifestly helps us to discern how the idea of toleration, when shorn of transcendent religious meaning and principles, is inevitably shaped and defined by the ersatz religion of power, especially political power of the state—"the Shadow Leviathan, that loss of power that invites the excess of power." Acquiring power, hence, best describes the chief characteristic of modern politics, economics, and science. Toleration, in effect, becomes a means to an end in a secular culture, and is to be seen as a symptom of "the modern idolatry of power," as well as of the slavish pursuit of power that culminates in the illusion of power. For Conyers, then, the modern doctrine of toleration plays a crucial role in what he terms the "process of the bipolarization of society." Insofar as "social life is framed by a national government at one end and the autonomous individual at the other," this "bipolar vision of society" is one that, in its anonymity and abstractness, becomes oppressive since it serves the interests of centralized power.

As Conyers conclusively demonstrates in this book, it is the very character of modernity that has made tolerance a secular virtue. But this is a pseudo-virtue that has turned the idea of toleration on its head and has led to even more intolerance in American society, especially in the realm of higher learning. The question that Conyers believes we must begin to ask and strive to answer is, "How can one, in a word, disentangle the authentic practice of toleration from the modern doctrine of toleration?" He himself is perfectly clear in what has to be done in reclaiming and restoring the practice of toleration. And without hesitation or apology he insists that only a genuine return to pre-Reformation Christianity holds the answer to the question he poses. In the Enlightenment agenda that he sees encompassing our own time he judges idolatry and heresy to be the quint-

essential offshoots of a view of human existence that magnifies means over ends and that indiscriminately worships power. The debasement of the practice of toleration informed by an innately religious disposition and expression, Conyers believes, can be resisted and overcome. Such an effort must ultimately be animated by "an ecumenicity of the spirit" and not by an "ecumenicity on the material level." For such an effort to succeed, however, there must be a re-affirmation of a mutual *telos*—"man in God and God in man."

No doubt some readers will be surprised or even disappointed by Conyers's recommendations. We live, after all, in a post-modern, post-Christian world ruled by "enemies of the Permanent Things." Even those in any way sympathetic to Conyers will no doubt find his religious "solution" detached from the harsh reality of our secular fate. There are, too, many people who are now resigned to the great paradox of modernity, when, as Simone Weil prophetically observes in her "Analysis of Oppression" (1934), man has attained the mastery of technique over the forces of nature but still remains a slave of "the race for power." "Thus it is," she writes, "that man escapes to a certain extent from the caprices of blind nature by handing himself over to the no less blind caprices of the struggle for power." The largest part of *The Long Truce* is a detailed examination of the terrible reality of this struggle in relation to the negative features of the idea of toleration. Conyers remains convinced at the same time that even "destructive ideas are often founded on practices that are both good and true." *The Long Truce* bravely testifies to this conviction. What makes this book eminently worthy of our attention is the honesty of belief and understanding that inspires its point of view, and that gives Conyers the strength to convey forthrightly his Christian acceptations and affirmations.