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## Of Tolerance and Intolerance

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# OF TOLERANCE AND INTOLERANCE

*John Gee*

*Review of D. A. Carson. The Intolerance of Tolerance. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2012. 186 pp. with indices of names, subjects and scriptures. \$24.00 (hardback), \$16.00 (paperback).*

In graduate school I was disheartened to find that while the school promoted tolerance as the highest virtue, such tolerance was more often honored in the breach. Tolerance was used as an excuse for hatred and bigotry. This is because it is simply impossible to tolerate everything. One cannot tolerate both childhood innocence and pedophilia (to take an extreme example). One must choose what one will tolerate. In some cases the choice to tolerate some things will unavoidably and perhaps unintentionally cause us to cease to tolerate others.

D. A. Carson explores this seeming paradox in his book *The Intolerance of Tolerance*, although he takes a different line of reasoning. Carson distinguishes between two definitions of tolerance that he says are confused and conflicted.

Carson claims that under the older understanding of tolerance “a person might be judged tolerant if, while holding strong views, he or she insisted that others had the right to dissent from those views and argue their own cases.”<sup>1</sup> The older understanding was based on three assumptions: “(1) there is objective truth out there, and it is our duty to pursue that truth; (2)

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1 D. A. Carson (2012) *The Intolerance of Tolerance*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, p. 6.

the various parties in a dispute think that they know what the truth of the matter is, even though they disagree sharply, each party thinking the other is wrong; (3) nevertheless they hold that the best chance of uncovering the truth of the matter, or the best chance of persuading most people with reason and not with coercion, is by the unhindered exchange of ideas, no matter how wrong-headed some of those ideas seem.”<sup>2</sup> As a result, “the older view of tolerance held either that truth is objective and can be known, and that the best way to uncover it is bold tolerance of those who disagree, since sooner or later the truth will win out; or that while truth can be known in some domains, it probably cannot be known in other domains, and that the wisest and least malignant course in such cases is benign tolerance grounded in the superior knowledge that recognizes our limitations.”<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, the newer understanding of tolerance assumes “that there is no one view that is exclusively true.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, “we must be tolerant, not because we cannot distinguish the right path from the wrong path, but because all paths are equally right.”<sup>5</sup> Then “intolerance is no longer a refusal to allow contrary opinions to say their piece in public, but must be understood to be any questioning or contradicting the view that all opinions are equal in value, that all world views have equal worth, that all stances are equally valid. To question such postmodern axioms is by definition intolerant. For such questioning there is no tolerance whatsoever, for it is classed as intolerance and must therefore be condemned. It has become the supreme vice.”<sup>6</sup>

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2 Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance*, pp. 6-7.

3 Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance*, p. 11.

4 Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance*, p. 11.

5 Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance*, p. 11.

6 Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance*, 12.

A consequence of this newer understanding of tolerance is that any questioning of the coherence or logic of the position of someone holding this view is considered intolerance and will not be tolerated.

Carson discusses the history of tolerance, notes the inconsistency, if not blatant hypocrisy of advocates of the new tolerance, and explores how tolerance becomes a pretext for the persecution of Christians. It is a thoughtful and thought-provoking work.

Many universities have compulsory freshman reading of works designed to help them become more tolerant. Carson's work should be on those required lists, but probably will not. After all, his views would likely not be tolerated.

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