

Tolerance and the War on Religion

by Marvin Kohl

The atheist movement, rejuvenated by a wave of new and talented writers, has declared war on all religion. It is a new kind of war in the sense that religious belief is not the only target. Nor is it just an attack on Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, but on all religions. The charge often differs. But in its most vitriolic form, it is that all religious belief and religion are poisonous.

Why have atheists become so fired up? Why have liberals become angry enough to join the fracas? And what are the dangers of this war, including the consequences of not adequately recognizing the difference between tolerating the expression of ideas and tolerating evil action?

Liberals typically have been aware of some of the benefits of religious affiliation and the need for tolerance. But something has gone amiss, and they now recognize that there are far too many unacceptable costs. First and foremost is their recognition of how effective and dangerous suicide bombing is, especially when nourished by religious conviction. The albeit limited constraints of "just war" principles simply vanish before this new and fierce kind of guerrilla war. This seems to be enough to make some liberals believe that tolerance is misplaced. But there is more. For there is now reasonable, if not compelling, evidence to indicate that the present reaction is not merely a reaction to the fragile cognitive status of theology or to the moral abuses of too many religions but also to recognition of the fact that the hard religionist has become increasingly intolerant of liberal beliefs and practices. An increasing number of ordinary believers as well as fanatics seem intent on injuring their enemies, even if this necessarily results in the diminution of the democratic process and the attenuation of human welfare.

Given liberal timidity, these abuses might have been accepted. But no one likes being humiliated. No one likes being played for a sucker. And even the liberal pales before the lack of reciprocal tolerance. Reacting against what I shall call the sucker political stance – namely, that "we must tolerate those who refuse to tolerate us and would destroy us if they had the power to do so" – the atheist as well as the liberal cries out "enough is enough"! The time has come for tit for tat. The time has come for war.

The dangers of physical battle are generally well known. The cost in human life and treasure are the most obvious. But there are also consequences of doing political and verbal battle. As in physical battle, there is growing intolerance and hatred of one's enemies. Another, less visible consequence, is the loss of an already fragile good. Rationality, in the sense of being capable of making inferences both deductive and problematic, evaluating evidence and belief, and appealing to a universal and impersonal standard of truth, has long been recognized to be vital to the well-being and happiness of the human species. One of the dangers of war is that, when faced with the arguments of enemies, human beings, probably out of fear, are naturally inclined to suspend rationality and acquire the habit of using self-serving data. Hasty generalizations then rule the day.

Does this not ring true of the new war against religion? Are not important differences between kinds of utility – the utility of a belief, a particular practice, a religion, religion as a whole – being obscured? When, for example, we ask whether religion has

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made useful contributions to civilization, we are told with smug aplomb that it really has not, that religion is not only intellectually but morally pernicious or, more simply, that religion is poisonous by its very nature. To even suggest that some religions (for example the Jains, Quakers) may have special merit, that religion at its best provides the rich soil for love and optimism, or that religion often meets the need to deal with catastrophe – has become a new affront.

My answer is not intended to meet a purportedly self-evident truth, namely, that only cowards need the scaffolding of religion. Nor is it meant to meet the charge that religion, in balance, has produced more evil than good. Nor, by itself, does it purport to be a compelling argument against those who believe that, because there is no objective way of adjudicating questions about the utility of religion, a liberal should best remain a bystander. Rather it is a plea that those who attack religion not destroy the very values liberals cherish.

As liberals, we should accept some of the less exaggerated claims of atheists. Enough is surely enough concerning religious abuse and intolerance. Other salient claims of atheism include the following: Ethics and morality are independent of faith, and cannot be derived from it. It may be painful to accept, but when a religion claims a special divine exception for its practices and beliefs, it is practicing sophistry, if not immorality. As for theology and the need for rationality, suffice it to say that there is a complete lack of knowledge about the God of theism. However, it is necessary to add that this entails neither belief nor disbelief. Granted that we do not have knowledge about God, once an adequate distinction between belief and knowledge is made, we can reasonably believe something if we have good reason (especially evidence of a balance of positive utility) as long as we also have the intellectual integrity to acknowledge the cognitive limits of that belief. Last, but not least, the sucker political stance must go. Being made a sucker needlessly empowers one's enemies and invites defeat.