

Helen Barratt on the Christian response to tolerance

TOLERANCE

- SOCIETY'S 'SUPREME VIRTUE'

key points

The Christian faith is facing 'gradual marginalisation' in Britain and the notion of tolerance has become a supreme virtue.

Under the rule of the 'new tolerance', there is no scope for a doctor to 'deny' a patient access to a clinical intervention on the basis of their own personal beliefs about either the procedure or the patient's lifestyle choices.

If recent trends continue, it is possible that things may lead to increasing conflict between a Christian doctor's conscience and what is perceived by society as our professional duty to be 'neutral arbiters of medical care'.

Christian views have come under growing fire in recent months. Doctors who refuse to prescribe contraceptives to unmarried women or refuse to provide sex-change operations risk being struck off the medical register, according to new draft guidance issued by the GMC.¹ More broadly, Britain is coming under increasing pressure to legalise same-sex marriage and a campaign against this, endorsed by many Christians, has received widespread criticism in certain sections of the media.² These are just two examples but, in many cases, the criticism of Christian views is less about the issue itself, and more about the perceived intolerance of the Christians who hold them.

Earlier this year Christians in Parliament, an official All-Party Parliamentary Group, chaired by Gary Streeter MP, launched an inquiry called 'Clearing the Ground', which was tasked with considering the question: 'Are Christians marginalised in the UK?' The inquiry's main conclusion was that 'Christians in the UK face problems in living out their faith and these problems have been mostly caused and exacerbated by social, cultural and legal changes over the past decade.'³ High profile Christians, including Lord Carey, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, have also warned that the Christian faith is facing 'gradual marginalisation' in Britain.⁴

The 'new tolerance'

This marginalisation – or at least the removal of faith from the public square – is arguably the goal of the 'new atheists', such as Richard Dawkins. However, something wider than this is also going on in Western society, which has important implications for Christians. In a recent book, theologian Don Carson demonstrates how culture in the West has shifted from an 'old tolerance' to a 'new tolerance'.⁵ In the traditional definition of tolerance, one may have disagreed with another's stance, but still acknowledged the right of the other party to express their view. In the 'new tolerance', one simply should not disagree with another's views. Carson argues that this notion of tolerance has become a supreme virtue, if not the supreme virtue for much of the Western world.

Today any questioning or contradiction of the view that all opinions are equal in value, and all worldviews have similar worth, constitutes intolerance. Carson notes that this is due at least in part to the influence of postmodernism: 21st century society increasingly thinks less and less in terms of truth and error, preferring instead to think in terms of differences of opinion or varying perspectives.⁶

The intolerance of the 'new tolerance'

Jesus was clear when he said 'I am the way and the truth and the life.'⁷ However, in a post-postmodern

era, for many in society, all paths are equally valid. If Christians maintain that there is an exclusive element to their faith, which implicitly suggests that others are wrong, they frequently face charges of intolerance. Both referencing their own professed faith, David Cameron has said that Christians should be more 'tolerant and welcoming'⁸ whilst Barack Obama has argued that Christians should follow 'the Golden Rule... treat others the way you would want to be treated'.⁹

The enemies of the new tolerance are those, such as Christians, who adopt strongly asserted positions and claim to know the truth. For the new tolerance to work, society must – ironically – be intolerant of them. We see this most often when the principles of free speech and the principles of tolerance clash: free speech must lose. For example, sexual orientation is being given increasing protection under equality legislation, but this is often at odds with religious belief. Many proponents of the 'new tolerance' would argue strongly in favour of free speech, but at the same time will not tolerate those who oppose gay marriage or afford them the opportunity to express their views in the public arena.

The new tolerance in practice

Don Carson argues that a disproportionate part of the 'new tolerance' is directed towards Christians and Christianity. Examples of this in recent years range from the Christian couple barred from fostering because of their views on sexual ethics (the High Court ruled that laws protecting people from discrimination because of their sexual orientation should take precedence over the couple's right not to be discriminated against on religious grounds)¹⁰ to the van driver facing disciplinary action for displaying a palm cross because it may offend those of other faiths.¹¹

When the 'new tolerance' becomes shackled to growing claims for individual freedoms and the right to self-determination, this has direct consequences for Christian medical practice. A clinician's right to conscientious objection is enshrined in law and in professional guidelines.¹² However, others claim that a doctor who 'refuses to refer for a particular procedure, has fractured the trust and respect upon which a successful consultation relies. Patients rely upon doctors for their expertise and should be able to trust their doctor to be a neutral arbiter of medical care.'¹³

Under the rule of the 'new tolerance', there is no scope for a doctor to 'deny' a patient access to a clinical intervention on the basis of their own personal beliefs about either the procedure (consider for example abortion and – potentially – physician-assisted dying) or the patient's lifestyle choices. Christian paediatrician Dr Sheila Matthews was dismissed from her role on the local authority's adoption panel after requesting to refrain from voting when homosexual couples were being considered as potential adoptive parents.¹⁴

The 'new tolerance' and the state

As Christians we must 'understand the times'¹⁵ both in terms of what is happening at a cultural level, but also at a higher level. The 'new tolerance' requires that the state must be intolerant of those who do not accept that all paths are equally valid. Christians are required to submit to the state¹⁶ but sometimes the state can be a persecuting 'beast'. In Revelation 13, we see the beast of the state combine against God's people with a second beast which looks 'like a lamb' and represents the religious aspects of life.¹⁷ We have seen the destructive combined force of the state and religion down through history. Now, arguably we see the ideology of aggressive secularism (anti-religion, perhaps) and the state combining against the Church in the form of the new tolerance. It is yet another irony that this often involves using the legislation of equality and human rights – concepts which owe their background to Christianity.

Our response

The vitriol against Christian views and the ridicule of those who stand up for them can be hard to stomach.¹⁸ However, in the light of Revelation 13, we should not be surprised. We know that we preach 'Christ crucified – a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles'.¹⁹ Jesus told his followers that, if the world hated them, they should keep in mind that it hated him first,²⁰ yet when the crowds hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate.²¹

We do not know what the future will hold but, if recent trends continue, it is possible that things will only get more challenging for Christian doctors. Developments in medicine, for example if physician-assisted dying is legalised, may lead to increasing conflict between our conscience and what is perceived by society as our professional duty to be 'neutral arbiters of medical care'.²² However, Revelation 13 calls us to patient endurance and faithfulness,²³ and given the instructions of Romans 13, we should continue to submit to the state and participate in democratic processes such as government consultations. We must pray for our own endurance, wisdom and discernment, but also for those proclaiming Christian values in the public arena and all those whom God has called into places of authority.

The Bible is clear. We will eventually get to the end of Revelation when both beasts of Revelation 13 are destroyed²⁴ and the 'former things' will have passed away.²⁵ In the meantime, we must remember that Jesus is Lord and entrust ourselves 'to him who judges justly'.²⁶

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