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Extreme tolerance leads to intolerance

Steve Bakke  July 27, 2021



I've been offering comments about tolerance and intolerance for several years, all the while thinking my approach was somewhat original. A little research and my prideful feelings were suddenly threatened. Almost 2,500 years ago, Plato proposed the possibility of tolerance inevitably leading to intolerance. I gave up reading that dissertation after getting tangled up in a Platonic discussion of "benevolent dictatorships."

Karl Popper's 1945 book "The Open Society and its Enemies" dealt with unlimited tolerance and the inevitable destruction of tolerance by intolerance. The "Stand to Reason" website dealt with the subject "When Tolerance is Intolerant" in 2013. In 2017, a Psychology Today article, "Is Teaching Tolerance the Solution or the Problem," offered the idea that "the only difference between tolerance and intolerance is political correctness." Humbly, I must admit my lack of originality.

What brought me back to the topic is our society and its politics. No serious observer can avoid uttering the word "intolerance," often doing so quietly so as not to "stir the pot." We're in the middle of stringent conflict and hard feelings. This follows a perfect storm of disagreement formed by two presidential impeachment hearings, 2020 election issues, and a world-wide pandemic. Garnish for this toxic "societal soup" is a generous sprinkling of subjective suffixes, i.e. "isms" and "ists," along with a laundry list of "phobias."

Recently, the use of "phobia" seems to be growing exponentially. It has saturated our society as an emphatic expression of disdain associated with an accusation of something close to evil. A friend observed that perhaps this is a result of the gradual corruption of society's use of another word – intolerance.

I decided to pick up on that theme after reading scathing opinions about the various phobia labels being assigned to republicans and conservatives. I'm not going to debate those opinions, however. Rather, I'll focus on the concepts of tolerance and intolerance, and the recent proliferation of the terms associated with "phobias", "isms" and "ists."

It wasn't long ago that the term "phobia" simply reflected extreme fear of things like flying, insects, heights, or small spaces, etc. A related term, but one used more exclusively to describe interpersonal feelings or relationships, was "intolerance" – and the "flip side" of intolerance is "tolerance."

Retreat in time a couple decades and you would find that tolerance was a feeling about a person, group, organization, opinion, policy, etc. It reflected feelings that while not enthusiastic, were more positive than negative. Tolerance of something meant one would not take a stand against it. Tolerance was true acceptance, but not necessarily agreement or approval.

By contrast, in recent years, the definition of tolerance evolved and expanded – now, not only is acceptance required to qualify as tolerant, but also agreement, approval, and often vocal endorsement. A willingness to just peacefully accept something is no longer enough to be considered tolerant.

Individuals once praised as patiently "tolerant" are now criticized for their "intolerance." These recently labeled intolerant folks never really wavered in their traditional liberal views or attitudes, yet have earned a "bigot badge" in progressive minds.

Perhaps a progressive pundit decided that a term like "phobic" might serve their purpose better than "intolerant." The pundit may have considered it an understatement and confusing to call these formerly tolerant bigots merely "intolerant." Hence, many formerly acceptable societal attitudes are now assigned "phobic," and even "racist" labels.

Author and educator Ibram X. Kendi writes that a traditional civil rights goal, one that earned liberal backing, was racial neutrality in attitudes. This ideal of "colorblindness" is now declared to be racist.

It's becoming inescapably true that if tolerance is taken to a radical extreme, it can easily morph into a new and insidious form of intolerance - one in which mere acceptance is no longer adequate. Is this more than just a gradual shift in attitudes? Is it an attempt to materially disrupt and reconstruct our society?