

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Intolerance in America: The Case of Brendan Eich

Over the last twenty years especially, homosexuality has been reframed as an issue of rights. The debate over same-sex marriage has been redefined that way as well. Overall, both issues are now viewed exclusively as a civil rights issue. One of the primary results of viewing these as civil rights issues is the tendency to limit First Amendment rights, especially the freedom of speech and the freedom of religious expression. In other nations, we are already seeing this occur. In England, a Catholic school was forbidden to fire its openly gay headmaster. In Canada, the Alberta Human Rights Commission forbade a Christian pastor from making “disparaging” remarks about homosexuality or even repeating biblical condemnations. Such blatant challenges to free speech are not quite yet occurring in America, but we are almost there.

Why is this important? It is a central issue of our democracy. In addition, it illustrates how the American democratic system views freedom of speech and freedom of religious expression in an increasingly pluralistic culture where tenaciously held exclusivist beliefs are common. As theologian D.A. Carson argues, “Mutually exclusive beliefs, religious or otherwise, are not dangerous, provided there is also a mutual commitment to ongoing discourse, *to the older kind of tolerance.*” As Duane Litfin demonstrates, “The danger, whether under religious auspices (the Inquisition, the Taliban) or secular (Nazism, Stalinism), stems from the totalitarian recourse to coercion.” We are seeing a new form of “tolerance” that is both unfair and misguided—and potentially very dangerous for our democratic order of things.

A recent example of this type of “coercion” occurred in the case of Brendan Eich, one of the founders of and, until a few days ago, CEO of Mozilla, which makes the popular Firefox web browser. The central concern was a 2008 donation of \$1,000 that Eich made in support of Proposition 8, a California measure that banned same-sex marriage. OkCupid, a popular online dating service, set up a letter, visible to those visiting its site on Firefox, castigating Eich. The letter stated that “Mozilla’s new CEO, Brandon Eich, is an opponent of equal rights for gay couples. We would therefore prefer that our users not use Mozilla software to access OkCupid.” The letter then concluded that “those who seek to deny love and instead enforce misery, shame and frustration are our enemies, and we wish them nothing but failure.” A few days later Brandon Eich resigned as CEO of Mozilla. The Eich situation demonstrates the intolerance of the “gay rights” movement and the growing power this movement now has in our culture. The role of personal beliefs, personal rights of expression (i.e., freedom of speech) and the freedom of religious expression are irrelevant to such entities as OkCupid. Indeed, Andrew Sullivan, a prominent gay writer, expressed outrage over Eich’s departure as CEO of Mozilla. In his popular blog, he declared that Eich had been “scalped by some gay activists.” He went on, “If this is the gay rights movement today—hounding our opponents with a fanaticism more like the religious right than anyone else—then count me out.” Sullivan was correct when he concluded that what happened to Eich should “disgust anyone interested in a tolerant and diverse society.” Appropriate to this issue is what Justice Clarence Thomas argued in his concurring opinion in the 2010 *Citizens United* case: “I cannot endorse a

view of the First Amendment that subjects citizens of this Nation to death threats, ruined careers, damaged or defaced property, or pre-emptive and threatening warning letters as the price for engaging in ‘core political speech,’ the primary object of the First Amendment.”

The gay rights, same-sex marriage issue is being framed as a civil rights issue and opposition to gay marriage is increasingly being compared to racism. When that comparison is made, the debate is over and in a great many circles, endorsement of same-sex marriage has rather suddenly become nonnegotiable. Those who oppose it are illegitimate, outside the realm of polite society and acceptable debate. But as Ramesh Ponnuru of *Bloomberg View* correctly observes, “The civil rights movement did not, in fact, conduct itself in this fashion. It did not seek to marginalize those who opposed it, or had reservations about it, when those holdouts made up more than a third of the population. It did not insist on public recantations by all of them.”

As Christians who believe in God’s moral law and who believe that God’s Creation Ordinance (Genesis 2:18-25) excludes same-sex marriage, what then are we to do? D.A Carson proposes ten propositions to guide us through this absurd situation where Postmodern tolerance is actually coercion and intolerance:

1. Expose the New Tolerance’s Moral and Epistemological Bankruptcy. Only a shift back to the “older tolerance” that fosters rigorous debate about mutually exclusive claims to truth and about competing moral visions is acceptable.
2. Preserve a Place for Truth. We must insist on truthful speech, truthful analyses, truthful representations of other religions and religious viewpoints and truthful representations of what the Constitution says.
3. Expose the New Tolerance’s Condescending Arrogance.
4. Insist that the New Tolerance is not “progress.” Carson writes: “The petty gains in open-mindedness that we have achieved in recent decades cannot compare with the staggering losses in clarity as to what tolerance is, in understanding the non-negotiability of truth, in the moral blindness that is rocking our world—a blindness we barely detect.”
5. Distinguish between Empirical Diversity and the Inherent Goodness of all Diversity. Not all empirical choices in Postmodern pluralism are inherently right or good.
6. Challenge Secularism’s Ostensible Neutrality and Superiority. Carson: “Once we have opened the door to categories like right and wrong, truth and error, then we can no longer escape fundamental questions about what makes something right or wrong, true or false.”
7. Practice and Encourage Civility.
8. Evangelize.
9. Be Prepared to Suffer.
10. Delight and Trust in God.

I believe that Dr. Carson has given us a paradigm for engagement in our increasingly intolerant, coercive culture. May God give us the grace to represent Him well.

See D.A. Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 36-40, 161-176; *Wall Street Journal* editorial (7 April 2014); Ramesh Ponnuru in Bloomberg News, www.bloombergnews.com (7 April 2014); Frank Bruni in www.nytimes.com (7 April 2014); Nick Bolton and Noam Cohen in the *New York Times* (4 April 2014).