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The Long Truce: How Toleration Made the World Safe for Power and Profit

A. J. Conyers
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“Everyone who receives the protection of society owes a return for the benefit,” wrote John Stuart Mill. At what price freedom? Theologian Conyers believes a free-thinking society pays by sacrificing its sacred life for social cohesion. In this scholarly study, Conyers examines the changing face of toleration, from its Biblical emphasis on community to its modern use in describing the relationship between a powerful nation-state and the lonely individual it has wrought.

Conyers posits that a tolerant society seemingly encourages a variety of voices—as long as they are not in competition with the powers that be. In exchange for a private life, the individual becomes “bound with cords of iron” to the centralized power of its regime. Therein lies the sacrifice behind toleration, which becomes the “solvent that resists the glue of common conviction that holds people together” since individuals are easier to control than are groups with their respective loyalties and “tender bonds.” The result is a “bi-polar” society that brackets public life between the individual and the state, knocking the teeth out of other “untidy natural associations,” such as the church and community.

In rather donnish detail, Conyers looks at how “toleration became the pragmatist’s substitute for love” by delving into the works of Thomas Hobbes, Pierre Bayle, John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Nietzsche, and John Dewey, eventually dismissing all of them as “bargaining agents.” Conyers contends that where there is no longer a transcendent purpose in life, there is a subsequent drive to make up for that loss, such as in Nietzsche’s overweening emphasis on the power of the imagination as a substitute for a belief in God.

While Conyers bemoans modern society’s neutralizing effect on “the varied, subtle, personal, and therefore unpredictable,” his book sometimes suffers from a similar reductionism. He overlooks the fact that John Stuart Mill, whom he cites as contributing to the spiritual decline, always emphasized the influence of Wordsworth’s poetry in his own life and work.

When the idea of the Incarnation is proposed in the last chapter as a guide to restoring the practice of true toleration, the tone lightens considerably. In emphasizing the interdependency of God and man, Conyers’s plea for a “listening heart” in the manner of Pre-Reformation Christians, who reached out to a diverse community, is a clarion call to those searching for ways to replace the love of power with the power of love.
JUDY HOPKINS (July / August 2001)

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