

## How Can a Religious Person Tolerate Other Religions?

*Dennis Prager*

WHEN I WAS IN MY EARLY TWENTIES, a prominent American rabbi, Yitz Greenberg, once heard me lecture to a Jewish group. I was offering comparisons between Judaism and other religions. Afterward he complimented me on my speech but warned me to resist the great temptation to compare the best of one's own religion to the worst of other religions.

It was a very important warning. It is so terribly easy and gratifying to compare the most refined thinking of your own religion to the most superficial in another. You win the debate every time.

In that regard, if God acts in our lives—a proposition over which I have some conflicting opinions—he certainly arranged my radio show, KABC's "Religion on the Line." For eight years, every Sunday night, for two commercial-free hours, I have dialogued with Protestants and Catholics and, increasingly, members of other faiths as well. I have, by necessity, as well as conviction, developed an attitude of respect for the profundity of others' religious views. I frequently sum it up this way: *The moment you meet a person of another religion whom you consider to be as good, as intelligent, and as religious as you are, you will never be the same.*

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## I

Three distinct types come to mind when I consider the topic of tolerance. The first is secular tolerance, most vigorously espoused in our country. This is the way I would put it: You believe in nothing, you stand for nothing, so you tolerate everything. "Gee, I don't care what you believe." "It doesn't matter to me." "Live and let live." "It doesn't matter what you do so long as you don't hurt anybody." These are the mottoes of American secular tolerance.

They are very easy to live by. If you don't have any convictions, how could you possibly be infuriated by anyone else's? That is why religious people are labeled, almost by definition, intolerant. We take a stand on something. If the Catholic Church, for instance, will not give out condoms, the secular community will condemn the Catholics for not being activist enough on the issue of AIDS.

I don't object to birth control, yet I defend the Catholic Church's right to take a stand on this issue. One of the ironies I have found in American life is that, in effect, only those with convictions can truly be tolerant of others with convictions. In the final analysis, American secular tolerance is really only tolerance of those who are similarly secular and have no position. That is why, as a religious Jew, I frequently have more in common with religious non-Jews than with irreligious Jews.

Nonreligious Jews who come over for a Sabbath are usually far less comfortable with our ritual, our singing, and our benedictions before and after eating than are my non-Jewish religious guests. The Jew who is alienated from Judaism is still a fellow Jew because Jews are born Jews. This, I know, confuses many people, since two significant groups have real difficulty defining Jews: Jews and non-Jews. So let me explain. A Jew is a Jew by birth as an American is an American by birth. So *Jewish* is both a religion and a national identity.

The sense of identity that I frequently experience with religious people has nothing to do with national identity. In our home we strictly observe the Sabbath (which is why I do not broadcast on Friday night or Saturday), and we very frequently have guests over for a Sabbath meal. These guests are almost always religious, but only about half of the time are they Jewish. They may be religious Mormons, religious Protestants, religious Catholics—the people with whom I can make my Jewish Sabbath with great comfort.

So, part of the reason that I can, for instance, identify with the Catholic position even though I favor birth control is that it is a religious conviction. I understand religious conviction. Let me give you another example. Secular Dennis Prager, in fact the natural Dennis

Prager, the de-Judaized Dennis Prager, if you will, is so liberal that most of my radio show listeners would probably be shocked. My instinct is pure sixties: Do whatever you want so long as you don't hurt anybody. Therefore, I have no internal revulsion against homosexuality. If you want to do it, and you are an adult, who am I to object? I can even see bestiality, so long as you can certify that the animal said okay—that may be the one moral problem there.

I simply have no personal objection to anything that people do so long as it doesn't hurt others. But I am not only a secularized human being who doesn't care what people do. I am also a Jew. My religion tells me that the only sacred expression of sexuality is marital and heterosexual. It tells me that all other expressions of sexuality are, in varying degrees—and *varying degrees* is a very operative term for me as I believe very profoundly in gradations of sin—unholy. I would not even say immoral. I distinguish between the immoral—improper conduct toward other people—and the unholy—improper conduct toward God alone. Why is sex between two men immoral if they are consenting and of majority age? I can't use that term, immoral. I can use the term that describes what it really is, unholy. For those who do not care about the holy, and that is the majority of Americans today, certainly the majority of well-educated Americans, being unholy is no big deal. To say that a sex act is unholy is to use a term that has no relevance. But to us in the Judeo-Christian world, it is a very big deal.

So, what is my attitude toward homosexuality? Civilly, I am tolerant of it. I don't believe that a person should be persecuted for it, to say the least. I am opposed to "gay bashing" and "gay baiting." I am opposed to treating anyone who has not done evil as anything less than being created in God's image. I have very strong feelings about that. But I do not believe that homosexuality is an equally fine, alternate way of expressing one's sexuality. Am I therefore intolerant?

To my mind, despite my religious objections, I am tolerant. In fact, I should get credit for being so tolerant of something that my values are so opposed to. My approach is to allow civil rights and religious convictions to coexist. While having strong convictions, I don't seek to impose them via government fiat. I don't want the government to jail adulterers. But if there were to be a synagogue created called the adulterers' synagogue, as there is a gay synagogue, I would oppose that *within my religion*. I want every gay Jew to be able to pray in any synagogue, including my own. I do not want to create a synagogue specifically for men who have anal intercourse with other men, just as I don't want to have an adulterer's synagogue. Adulterers *should* feel a little funny about entering the synagogue—that is, after all, a purpose of religion: to make you feel a little funny when you violate the Ten

Commandments. You *should* feel something, or your religion has failed rather profoundly. But if we were to clear the synagogues of adulterers, we would barely have a Minyan (the quorum in Judaism of ten males forming the traditional service). There is a lot of adultery, I suspect, even among those of serious religious conviction.

My first definition of tolerance, then, is of American secular tolerance: You believe in nothing and you want others to believe in nothing. Such people have a difficult time tolerating people who believe in something.

## II

A second type of tolerance is political. The central question here concerns the use of power: When you have power, do you repress others? It is very easy for a Jew to be politically tolerant of Christianity in America. It is deceptively easy for a Christian to be tolerant of non-Christians when the church no longer has any political power. It is remarkably easy for a Muslim in England to be tolerant of non-Muslims.

So the test of political tolerance is not easy to administer. The question is when you have power, are you tolerant? Do you repress? That is the real test. In this regard, church history has not been noble. When it had the power, the church was not tolerant of non-Christians. And please know that as a Jew who wrote a book on antisemitism, I am using the most understated language at my disposal.

I tell my fellow Jews, however, that their fears about a resurgent Christianity in America are not well founded. In the past, when Christians had much more power in America, Jews fared relatively well. Antisemitism in America did exist, but it was not necessarily religiously sponsored. Harvard medical school, for example, had quotas on Jews, but these were not instigated by Protestant churches. Generally speaking, Christians in America have a good record. So although European Christianity has a dismal record, I am not terribly afraid of Christians in America.

Political tolerance also concerns members of your own faith. It is frequently harder to be tolerant of members of your own faith than to be tolerant of members of other faiths. Orthodox Jews usually have a far harder time with Reform and Conservative Jews than with Mormons, Protestants, Catholics, or Muslims. It is within our own religion where differences are the most difficult to tolerate. Most traditional Communists, for instance, hated democratic socialists far more deeply than they did capitalists.

It is easy to be nice when you are a weak minority. An Orthodox Jew can easily tolerate other Jews when he or she has no power. But consider Israel, where Orthodox Jews have power because the state only recognizes Orthodox rabbis as rabbis. In a similar vein, how do Mormons treat members of their own faith who differ?

What do you do when you have power? That is the litmus test of whether you are really tolerant.

### III

The third type of tolerance is the most rare. It involves *respecting* other beliefs, not merely tolerating them. In America, after all, it is easy to be tolerant. In fact, if "intolerant" means imposing your will on others, then it is actually difficult for a religion to be intolerant in this country.

That is why "tolerant" is a tricky term. I know of few religious people in America who wish to repress, through political or physical coercion, anyone else because he or she has a different religious faith.

In fact, I frequently remind secular liberals that when they charge churches with attempting to "impose" their religious will on the majority, they aren't being honest. If any group imposes its will on others, it is secular liberals. What else, for example, is civil rights legislation if not coercion? I wholly agree with such legislation, but I acknowledge that it is an imposition of my will on segregationists. If an American wishes to serve only white people in his own restaurant, he may not—because those of us who supported civil rights legislation have imposed our will on him. I object when secular people say, "Only the religious impose their will." Let's be honest. The religious impose their will far less in America than secular liberals do. The liberal argument against religious activists, "You can't legislate morality," is simply false. Virtually all liberal legislation is legislated morality.

Simply because our system of government forbids religious coercion, however, does not mean that all religious Americans are therefore tolerant by my third definition of tolerance. Real tolerance goes beyond absence of coercion. It involves respect. It is one thing to tolerate, it is quite another to respect another religion. To do so is very difficult—but not because people are emotionally opposed to respecting other religions. The problem is theological. *It is not usually our humanity but our theology that blocks respect for the claims of another religion.*

I did not understand this ten or fifteen years ago. I confess to having grown (or so I hope). It is easy not to repress other religions, but very difficult to affirm another religion's legitimacy while maintaining the absolute truth of your own. And I do not mean that we should

adopt the liberal religious attitude, "All faiths are equally beautiful, including my own." That attitude reminds me of an incident that sounds like a priest-minister-rabbi joke, but is, unfortunately, a true story. One night my topic for "Religion on the Line" was, "Why do you affirm your religion?" To be honest, I was very tired that night, and so I chose an easy topic. I could lean back in my chair and let the clergy on my chosen panel expound the virtues of their respective faiths. Is there an easier question for a clergyman to answer than why he affirms his own religion?

I was sure that I would have a relaxing evening. I started with the Protestant minister. "Reverend, why are you a Christian?"

"I believe," he responded, "that Jesus Christ is the son of God, that he is God, and that humankind attains salvation through belief in our Lord, Jesus Christ. I also believe that the Bible is the word of God."

"Thank you, Reverend. Now, Father, why are you a Catholic?"

"I am a Roman Catholic because I believe everything that the Reverend just said, and I believe that the pope is the vicar of Christ on earth and that the Church is the living, ongoing community of revelation to the world."

"Thank you, Father. Rabbi, now why are you a Jew?"

"Because I like it."

I had been sitting back, relaxing, expecting a brief but eloquent soliloquy on Judaism. I rushed back to the microphone. I was incredulous. That was it? "I am a Jew because I like it," period?

I said, "Rabbi, we all assume you like it. Otherwise, first, you wouldn't be a Jew and second, certainly you wouldn't be a rabbi. We take that as a given, Rabbi. But *why* are you a Jew? The reverend spoke about the truth of Christ, and the Catholic father spoke about the truth of Catholicism. Is Judaism true?"

I was trying to elicit from him some statement of Judaism's truth. But he was a good liberal rabbi. He said, "For me it is true."

I said, "Rabbi, that doesn't work—for *you* it is true. If I were to ask you, 'Do two and two equal four?' you wouldn't say, 'For *me* it is four.' Either something is true or it is not true. So what do you say?"

But he wouldn't go any further than personal preference. He just wouldn't budge. Finally an hour later, the Catholic priest, Father Michael Nocita, made the case for Judaism in one of the finest moments I have ever witnessed on "Religion on the Line." Even the rabbi loved it. "I believe that the Jews are God's chosen people," Father Nocita began, and went on to make an eloquent, persuasive argument for Judaism. Only in America could a Catholic priest make the case for Judaism's truth on behalf of a rabbi who wouldn't.

That rabbi's theological egalitarianism is not the type of respect I am arguing for.

I prefer Mother Teresa's response, in a recent interview, when asked about her attitude toward other religions: "I like every faith and I love my own." At least she distinguishes hers from the rest. But I would go further. I don't like every faith, to be perfectly honest. I love religion, but I don't like every religious manifestation.

To claim so would be like saying, "I like all political views, but I love my own." I *don't* like all political views. Some political views I find abhorrent. Many religious expressions I find evil, and others, if not evil, at least intellectually unacceptable. Earning my theological respect takes more than being inoffensive. I find totem-pole worship inoffensive, but I don't regard it with great respect. I would tolerate but not admire it.

Nor do I feel a moral imperative to respect totem-pole worship. All I have to do is allow the practice. I don't respect New Age thought. In fact, I openly maintain that it is modern paganism, but I do let people engage in it.

That is the reason why tolerance as respect for other faiths is so problematic. Respect for another faith is not always possible. To what extent is it desirable? That is the question that I would like to pose: Can we respect other faiths?

Let me tell you why we'd better.

We Jews—and in this regard, Mormons also—make a lot of noise for our small numbers. I know this from personal experience. On my frequent airplane flights to lecture to more distant Jewish communities, the person sitting next to me will often inquire, "Where are you flying to?"

"Kansas City—I am going to give a lecture."

"To whom?"

"To the Jewish community."

If the person is a non-Jew, I have frequently asked, "I am curious. There are four to five billion people in the world, how many Jews do you think there are?" Usually, I get an answer in the hundreds of millions, and never under fifty million. When I tell them, "You know, there are only thirteen million Jews in the world," they reply, "They must all live in my state!"

Clearly it is possible to make a lot of noise without great numbers. This fact has forced me to confront a very serious question which I posed to an Orthodox rabbi on "Religion on the Line" one night. I said, "You know, Jews don't generally proselytize, so let me ask you, Rabbi, since Jews make up less than two-tenths of one percent of the people in the world and are not proselytizing, what do you want the

other 99.8 percent of the world to do religiously? After all, you can't hold for a moment that only Jews want to relate to God. How are non-Jews supposed to relate to God?" He volunteered the classic Jewish response that there are seven basic laws for all of humankind to observe. They are fundamental laws of ethics plus the injunction to not deny God. They do not, however, concern prayer or relating to God. But since we Jews believe that all people have a soul that yearns for God, for me the question remains: What are the 99.8 percent of the world that weren't at Sinai or who didn't convert to Judaism supposed to do?

Over the course of history, Jews have been far too busy surviving inquisitions and crusades to worry about how others were supposed to relate to God. When your overriding concern is, "Will they rape my daughter tomorrow?" you are not disposed to worry about the theological predicaments of others.

In America, however, Jews are now confronted with this dilemma for the first time. We are not being maltreated. In fact, as a people Jews are being helped immensely, both within this nation and abroad. Jews should be and are deeply grateful. They are quite in love with America.

So how are Jews supposed to relate to non-Jews? We are not commanded by our faith to bring non-Jews to Judaism. What do we, a nonproselytizing religion, believe a non-Jew who yearns to know God should do?

I have grappled with this question. And I have concluded, at least tentatively, that I must be open to the notion that God may in fact reveal himself in other ways. Thirty-two hundred years ago, Jews received revelation at Mount Sinai. What was supposed to happen over the course of the next thirty-two hundred years? Was the rest of the world to have no access to God except through Judaism? That seems unfair, to say the least. People want God, and if they do not come to God, they will arrive at a poor substitute, such as Mao, communism, or worship of the natural environment.

I do not assert as a matter of faith that "I believe with perfect faith that Christianity is a divine revelation to Gentiles." I cannot say that. But, I cannot deny it either. That is very important. I am a religious, believing Jew. I believe in the chosenness of my people, I believe in God's revelation at Sinai, I believe the traditional beliefs of Judaism. But I will not say, privately, publicly, in my heart, in my mind, that God does not reveal himself in other ways. I have to remain religiously agnostic in that regard.

I just don't know. Recently I began reading the Book of Mormon, in part because a very dear friend of mine is a Mormon. Joseph Smith's



introduction moved me immensely. I was especially moved by the beauty and the humanity as well as the spirituality of it. Here is Joseph Smith having revealed to him the location and significance of the plates and being warned, in effect, not to pawn them! "Now listen, Joseph Smith, here is God's revelation to humanity. Be happy you have it, but don't pawn the plates—I know you really need the money." You have no idea how this non-Mormon was moved by that particular detail. Nothing else gives the story as much credibility to a non-Mormon as does that part of it.

In a similar way, what makes the Hebrew Bible so credible to me is how unflatteringly the Jews are portrayed. Why would any group make up a story about how lousy they are? When you study the history of any group, you study its heroes. When you study the Hebrew Bible, you find both heroes and villains, but the heroes are often villains. David and Bathsheba I am not terribly proud of. King David, from whom the Messiah will emanate, arranges to marry a girl he craves—after a voyeuristic episode or two of watching her bathe—by sending her husband off to get killed. Charming.

In Deuteronomy God tells the Jews that he is bringing them into Israel not because they are worthy, but because he is honoring prior covenants with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God levels with them—they are a stiff-necked people. Now why would any group invent a divine insult? That is what I mean. Such details give great credibility to these accounts of God's dealing with the Jews and convince me of their divine origin.

Further, reading Joseph Smith's story I have to say to myself as a non-Mormon, either this destitute guy in upstate New York was self-deluded—all of a sudden the room lights up, he imagines this whole thing and fabricates this whole book—or maybe there is something more involved. And I have to say maybe there is something more involved with Mohammed, and maybe there is something more involved with the Apostles. If I don't allow for the something more, I end up having to say, "I have the only revelation God has ever made to humanity, period." God pinpointed 1 percent of the world and said, "You Jews now have seven laws to give to the rest of the world from whom I will be hidden." I just find that odd. It's not the God that I believe in.

I don't believe that Jesus was anything but a man from Nazareth. That is my belief. I'm being as straightforward as I can. But what about the billions who believe in him as divine? All wrong, all mislead, all deluded, all foolish? One of the things I most appreciate about Judaism is that I rarely have to deal with that problem. I don't have to assert that the only revelation is my own, because what Judaism demands from the world is not that it be Jewish, but that it be

ethical monotheist. Ethical monotheism — that all people believe in God and his law — is the animating ideal of my life.

So my standard of tolerance, in the sense of tolerance as respect, is this: Are you, are the fruits of your belief, good? Do you end up leading a holy and good life? To which the answer has to be with regard to millions upon millions of Christians, absolutely yes. Can it be argued that on the basis of a delusion a person leads a holy and moral life? Theoretically I can imagine it may be so. There were, after all, ethical pagans. But, outside of pure pagan polytheistic beliefs, as a Jew I am not required to judge the theology of non-Jews.

In fact, Judaism judges the non-Jew much less strictly than the Jew. The Jew has to live by all the Jewish laws and to affirm certain theological truths, and the non-Jew only has to live by the basic moral laws that God implants in all human beings. But a non-Jew wants more than that. A non-Jew wants to relate to God. And since we are not doing anything about bringing Judaism to non-Jews, I challenge my fellow Jews: What are non-Jews supposed to do — not steal, not murder, and then watch T.V.?

I direct this same question to Mormons and to Christians in general. What are those who will not accept your proselytizing to do? Are we consigned to the dustbin of history, as indeed some Protestants believe? “If you don’t believe in Christ, all your good works are like filthy rags” — if I don’t hear this on my show a hundred times a year, I don’t hear it once. This is a notion, by the way, that I find so objectionable, so reprehensible, that I think it is blasphemous. I consider it arrant blasphemy to suggest that God doesn’t care about how his children in a different religion treat each other. Does he only care about how you believe in him? Can it be true that even if you believe in him but don’t hold to a certain prescribed wording of belief, then you are consigned to hell? I don’t object to this idea because as a believing Jew I am the one being consigned to hell. If a Protestant says to me, “Dennis, with all respect, I think you are going to hell,” I promise you, as God is my witness, it doesn’t raise my blood pressure or pulse by a beat. Such theologically foolish statements don’t bother me personally at all. I could even still like the man. I have had clergy over to my house who think I’m going to hell — and we still fed them a nice meal.

These clergy, however, represent a type of intolerance which devalues others’ lives. It states, in effect, that if you don’t believe exactly as we do, your life is worthless, there is no hope for you, end of discussion. A dear Protestant minister who expressed this official position on the show a few weeks ago was obviously terribly uncomfortable with it. Afterward, we spoke for a few minutes privately, and I said, “Lis-

ten, why can't you simply adopt the following approach: You truly believe Christ is the only way to salvation. Okay. But since you are not God, why don't you simply say, 'I believe that Christ is the only way to salvation, but I am not capable of saying how God judges the rest of humanity.' Just say that." He responded with some relief, "I like that." For some it is a relief. For others it is the more demanding form of tolerance.

Every religion has, I am convinced, its Achilles' heel. Judaism's Achilles' heel is law. Jewish law can become, as one great rabbi said, *adovah zara*, idol worship. But it is also Judaism's blessing. It is always like that. The most beautiful parts of you are also your greatest problems.

Christianity's Achilles' heel is the belief in salvation through faith alone. That is its beauty to a Christian, but it is also its burden. Faith, too, can become idol worship. That's the irony. Just as law can become a false god, so faith also can become a false god.

Proselyting faith can lead to a Walter Martin, a Christian who devotes much of his time to attacking Mormons. In eight years of "Religion on the Line," Walter Martin, a man whom I had never met before, is the only clergyman I have ever attacked. I said to him, "You know, you radiate hate." I mention this not to defame him but to demonstrate how theological doctrines can make a person worse than if he had been irreligious.

That is what I mean by Achilles' heel. Sometimes theology can make us meaner than if we had no theology. While it may be possible to remain an utterly loving, kind human being while believing that everyone who doesn't believe as I do will go to hell, it must be terribly difficult. It is not a doctrine that brings forth beauty in the soul or fosters human empathy.

Let me raise one last issue related to tolerance. There is a tension between tolerating differences within your own religion and yet needing to have a central core of belief. This is often a most wrenching tension, one I live with daily. It is not fully answerable. I argue in a book I am writing called *Happiness Is a Serious Problem* that the belief that *happy* equals *tension-free* is a major obstacle to being happy. There are gratuitous tensions, and there are necessary tensions. Cows do not have tensions. But if we want to be fully human, we cannot have tension-free lives. I confront this all the time. I try to run a difficult middle line of affirming the centrality of Jewish law while not observing those laws that I am certain were created by historical circumstances that no longer apply.

Mormons have this problem in a different form, to the best of my poor knowledge, because you are answerable to a central authority, as

are Catholics. We Jews are not. What we have instead is community which can be as severe as any meeting with your bishop or anyone else that you have to answer to about your conduct as a Mormon. Yet however irksome intolerance and error within my own religion may become, secularism keeps me religious. There is no choice to being religious. If there were a third choice, I might opt for it. There isn't. You are either religious or secular. Secularism, while absolutely necessary governmentally, is personally, morally, intellectually, emotionally bankrupt. It is a dead end in life. It is to assert that I am a hodgepodge of molecules that coalesced by sheer chance. Life is pointless, suffering is pointless, joy is pointless, all is pointless. For me this is no option.

So how do we define a central core of belief yet allow for tolerance within religion? In "Beyond Reform, Conservative, and Orthodoxy: Aspiring to Be a Serious Jew" (*Ultimate Issues* 4 [July-Sept. 1988]: 3-7), I try to tell Jews that Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox are all fine, but more important is to be a *serious* Jew. Judaism consists of three components: God, Torah, and Israel—God, law, and people. A serious Jew is one who is committed to all three.

My advice to Jews is, "Look, you are not going to do everything, so don't do everything. *But you may not do nothing.*" If you won't fast all day on Yom Kippur, how about until noon? It is inconceivable to me that God would say, "Either you will fast from sunset to sunset or it doesn't count." I do fast the whole twenty-five hours, and with no drinking that is not easy. Jewish fasting is tough, but that is the law. I cannot imagine, however, that God would say, "Well, so-and-so only fasted until three o'clock, so forget him." It doesn't work like that. Does three o'clock not work? Or what about a Sabbath that isn't twenty-five hours? What about watching no TV on Friday night? What about making the Sabbath just Friday night? Make that the Sabbath. After all, the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments. I always tell Jews that I would much rather they observe fifty-two Sabbaths than one Yom Kippur. But, most Jews prefer one Yom Kippur. It is easier.

I think we have to try to get rid of the all-or-nothing approach: Either you do it all or you do nothing. My motto is that there is no hypocrisy in religion. If you observe some laws of your religion and not all, you are not a hypocrite. You are inconsistent and you are imperfect, but you are not a hypocrite. You are only a hypocrite if you lie about what you do and do not do.

Tensions within religion are inevitable. If you think and you are religious, you will have tension, and those tensions will make you more fully human and tolerant.

Among the happiest and proudest moments in my life are when I get letters from Christians saying they have returned to Christianity or

become serious Christians thanks to me. That is what I mean by respectful tolerance. When you can have joy from knowing you have brought a person to another religion, then you know that you have embodied what I think God wants us to do in this world.

