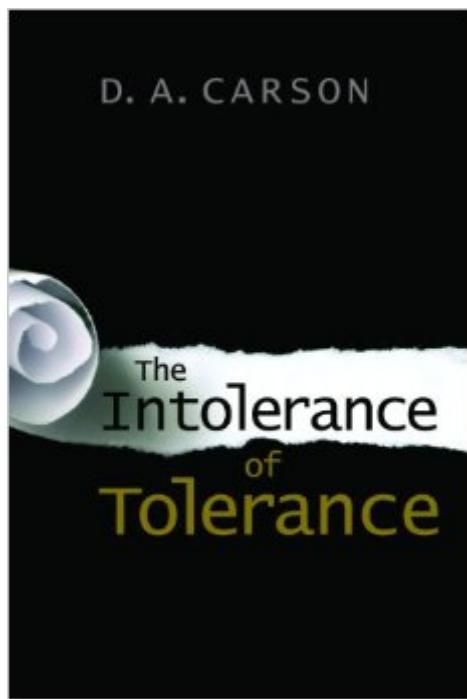


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The Intolerance Of Tolerance



Synopsis

Tolerance currently occupies a very high place in Western societies: it is considered gauche, even boorish, to question it. In *The Intolerance of Tolerance*, however, questioning tolerance -- or, at least, contemporary understandings of tolerance -- is exactly what D. A . Carson does. Carson traces the subtle but enormous shift in the way we have come to understand tolerance over recent years -- from defending the rights of those who hold different beliefs to affirming all beliefs as equally valid and correct. He looks back at the history of this shift and discusses its implications for culture today, especially its bearing on democracy, discussions about good and evil, and Christian truth claims. Using real-life examples that will sometimes arouse laughter and sometimes make the blood boil, Carson argues not only that the "new tolerance" is socially dangerous and intellectually debilitating but also that it actually leads to genuine intolerance of all who struggle to hold fast to their beliefs.

Book Information

Paperback: 196 pages

Publisher: Eerdmans; Reprint edition (February 8, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0802869408

ISBN-13: 978-0802869401

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.3 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 7.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (69 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #96,156 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #47 inÂ Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies > Religious Intolerance & Persecution #68 inÂ Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies > Ethics #160 inÂ Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Theology > Ethics

Customer Reviews

"Tolerance" has taken on an idolatrous golden calf status in our culture as of late, being the predominant ideology in nearly all areas of life. In *The Intolerance of Tolerance*, D.A. Carson tackles the elephant in the room, arguing against the current form of tolerance, which ironically is no tolerance at all. Birthed out of a series of lectures Carson has given across the Western world, the main argument of the book is that tolerance has come to be the prevailing mantra of our time. However, tolerance no longer means what it used to, and the new form of tolerance is not very

tolerant at all; at its best it is veiled intolerance and at its worst it borders on the absurd. Carson describes the old tolerance as a stance that acknowledges the existence of both right and wrong, and discoverable, defensible truth. This tolerance accepts "that a different or opposing position exists and deserves the right to exist" (p. 3). This tolerance respectfully engages in debates and criticisms. However, as Carson deftly argues, a new tolerance has taken over that is intolerant of the old tolerance. The new tolerance, Carson argues, is tolerant of all things on the surface, so long as no dogmatic, absolute, judgmental, critical, or disparaging remarks are made. This new tolerance has become part of the unquestioned plausibility structure; it accepts all opinions and renders them all equally valid. But under this new tolerance, right and wrong cease to have any meaning. It does not acknowledge any specific truth, and labels any religion or system of thought that claims to be true as intolerant. Thus, any disagreement - let alone claims to exclusive truth - is demonized as intolerant, leaving no room for anything but a spineless, tyrannical tolerance.

Is tolerance the highest ideal? What does tolerance mean and how can it be achieved? Can an evangelical Christian be tolerant? Carson's book deals with these questions as he probes western culture and its fixation on tolerance as the ideal that drives all social interaction. In his preface he states that there were two main incentives to writing this book. The first was the broad appeal and interactions in university settings when he lectured on this topic. The second was the overview that he had provided in his earlier book on culture, *Christ and Culture Revisited*. He wanted to explore the theme of tolerance and intolerance in more detail. In the introduction Carson provides two similar but competing definitions for tolerance that become the basis for everything else that he says in the book. He calls these the old tolerance and the new. The old tolerance is defined as the belief that other opinions have a right to exist. The new tolerance is defined as the belief that all opinions are equally valid. He unpacks these ideas and demonstrates from interaction with many other authors that these two ideas undergird much of the confusion and ultimately disagreement that one encounters in trying to discuss differing belief systems. The next few chapters cover how the shift in meaning of tolerance has occurred and then how it has been applied in today's society. Carson demonstrates how the older idea of tolerance is vital to a free society, and how the newer definition is actually inconsistent and ultimately unsustainable. Truth claims by major religions including secular humanism, if taken seriously, all deny the idea of tolerance in the newer definition.

D. A. Carson is a Research Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and is widely regarded as today's foremost New Testament scholar. Published last month, *The*

Intolerance of Tolerance is a welcome and much-needed addition to his catalogue of over 50 works. The purpose of Carson's book is to examine how the definition of tolerance has evolved over the years and to evaluate the detriment such change has spelled for both the Christian church and the broader culture. Carson's first chapter is entitled The Changing Face of Tolerance and his first heading reads The Old Tolerance and the New. Carson argues that while the verb "tolerate" was originally defined as "ACCEPT EXISTENCE OF DIFFERENT VIEWS", the verb has now subtly morphed to mean "ACCEPT DIFFERENT VIEWS". Carson describes this change as "subtle in form but massive in substance" (3). Carson's subject is daunting and he acknowledges the immensity of his task right from the first page. He notes that 'hinting that tolerance might on occasion be intolerance is unlikely to win many friends' (1). On a more philosophical level, he surmises that 'tolerance has become part of the Western "plausibility structure"... widely and almost unquestioningly accepted...to saunter into the public square and question it in some way or another is not only to tilt at windmills but also culturally insensitive, lacking in good taste, boorish' (2). His thorough analysis of the challenge he faces, however, lands him in good stead to topple the erroneous assumptions of tolerance that may be lodged in the reader's mind. Carson's subject is clearly defined and he can afford to be exhaustive. He evaluates the present scene in chapter 2 (What is Going On?

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