

The intolerance of tolerance

D.A. Carson (2012) Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing.

Arnold Reye

Retired Teacher and Educational Administrator

Once upon a time, according to D.A. Carson, the value we call tolerance was defined as recognising differing beliefs and practices and allowing or permitting those beliefs and practices to be held or conducted without interference or molestation. Today, says Carson, the definition has changed to include the notion that all differing views are of equal value. That change, declares Carson “is subtle in form and massive in substance.” His book, therefore, is an examination of the theoretical and practical implications and tensions between what he terms the “old tolerance” and the “new tolerance”.

Implicit in the new meaning is that all beliefs and practices are equally true and valid. The “old tolerance” was understood in a limited legal sense. For example, Christians would staunchly argue the rights of religious minorities before the law. The “new tolerance”, however, goes beyond this forensic perspective; it includes a social acceptance of difference so that in a multicultural society people of different ideologies or ethnicity should co-exist and feel comfortable. For example, if a minority objects to the singing of Christmas carols or a flag raising ceremony at school, then these practices should cease in deference to the minority. The rule is, no one should be offended. To argue to the contrary is perceived as intolerance and this has become the greater sin. In consequence, truth becomes muted.

For Carson the nub of the issue is truth. He argues that under the old understanding of tolerance there were three assumptions:

that there is objective truth and it is our duty to pursue it; that we have the right to express our understanding of truth and to disagree sharply; and that the discovery of truth is achieved through free inquiry and the open and vigorous exchange of ideas. In contrast, the new definition sees no hierarchy of truth. Rather, “all opinions are of equal value, ...all worldviews have equal worth, ...all stances are equally valid.”

Unfortunately, the new tolerance has become part of what Carson calls our *plausibility structure*, that is, it is accepted into our structures of thought without question or challenge. As a consequence it influences thought and behaviour in our social institutions such as health services, schools, churches, media, and law makers. It makes it difficult to discuss in public views on such issues such as marriage, abortion, discrimination, homosexuality, religion and religious proselytising, in fact any issue of a moral or values nature. To speak out from a religious perspective is to invite the label ‘fundamentalist’ or the epithet ‘intolerant’.

Understandably, Carson draws most of his case studies and illustrations from his North American social context. He does, however, cite an interesting Australian example. The Australia Institute is reported to have issued a report titled *Mapping homophobia in Australia*. One finding was that 62 percent of evangelical Christians are homophobic. This finding was based upon an agree/disagree response to the statement: “I believe that homosexuality is immoral.” To agree meant a homophobic stance. Carson points out “there was no moral engagement with the complexities surrounding human sexuality, but merely a label used to brand an entire class of people with the supreme shame: intolerance.”

This book has been written from a theological-philosophical perspective. Reading can be heavy going at times, but it is well worth persevering. It is a reminder that unless, even at the individual level, we are cognisant of and responsive to the insidious nature

of the intolerance of tolerance, even in our democratic society, our individual rights will be progressively eroded. Carson issues a wake-up call.

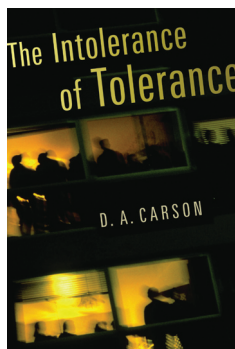
Carson has provided this reviewer with a prism through which to analyse and understand some of the important issues currently reported in the media. For example, on the day of writing this review, Brisbane's daily newspaper carried a report that the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples wants the Federal Government to (1) fund a national racism re-education program; (2) legislate to allow third parties to sue people for racist behaviour; and (3) to agree that all levels of government seek the prior consent of Aboriginal people before making laws and policies that affect them. The writer expressed a concern that it is assumed Australia is a racist country, and that Section 18C of the Racial Antidiscrimination Act—"the hurt feelings' test"—makes it an offence to express anything "reasonably likely in all circumstances, to offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate" because of racial origin or ethnicity. The article correctly points out that "in any vigorous debate, people's sensitivities are likely to be bruised but under 18C to utter anything that may 'reasonably' offend someone is to risk being hauled before the court" and labelled a racist.¹ Australia has its own bag full of examples of the intolerance of tolerance.

Carson, of course, was not writing specifically for educators. What he has argued, however, does have important implications for Christian teachers. At one level we must be continually on guard against new tolerance thinking in our own decision-making and policy development. We must avoid passive acceptance of new tolerance outcomes from legislators, pressure groups and strident minorities. We must effectively argue the deficiencies and arrogance of new tolerance thinking and arguments—what Carson calls its moral and epistemological bankruptcy. We must

¹ Mike O'Connor, 'Hand in hand we are up in arms', *The Courier Mail*, 13 August 2012.

be true to our own understanding of truth and be equally rigorous in examining, evaluating and modifying our belief structures.

At another level, we should educate our students to think, both deeply and spiritually, about the great moral and ethical issues of our times. We should provide our young charges with the skills and framework in which to carry out this evaluation. We should provide forums in which issues might be discussed and argued and thereby demonstrate the true meaning of tolerance. And, we should provide our students with a clear and unequivocal Christian worldview; that perspective that gives cohesion and consistency to thought and action. **TEACH**



Arnold Reye

[Photograph:
Arnold Reye]