

THE HERITAGE LECTURES

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The Limits of
Liberty:
Individual Freedom
and Social Disorders

By William A. Donohue

Tolerance or Indifference? Social observers are often ecstatic when they read that a new survey reveals Americans to be more tolerant than they were ten or twenty years ago. They interpret such findings as confirmation of the dawning of a new day, a day in which individual liberties can be maximized. It seldom occurs to them that beneath the veneer of tolerance lies exhaustion, a total collapse of caring about what others do to themselves. Scratch tolerance hard enough, and indifference will surface. Not always, but in many more cases than we are willing to admit.

Is tolerance in the eye of the beholder? When syndicated columnist Michael Kinsley learned that a 1985 poll of Nebraskans indicated that 75 percent thought it was "all right" for their divorced governor to have an actress friend stay at his mansion, Kinsley instantly concluded that this "heartwarming testimony" was proof of greater tolerance and declining "prudishness." But why is it "heartwarming" to learn that people approve of fornication? And was it approval that people were registering, or downright disinterest? Judging from the reaction to Gary Hart's adventures, it may very well be that public tolerance of a politician's immorality is indexed to the level of office that is in question: the higher the office, the higher the standards. If so, then Mr. Kinsley's reasons for celebration seem premature.

A Double-Edged Sword. Similarly, when sociologist Theodore Caplow and associates examined Muncie, Indiana, in 1975, they boasted that there was a significant increase in tolerance in the fifty years that separated their study from the earlier ones conducted by Robert and Helen Lynd in 1925 and 1935. The Middletown (as Muncie is referred to in the studies) researchers also noted a stark increase in divorce, illegitimacy, drugs, and pornography. They were largely reticent about the possibility that the increase in moral decay was occasioned by the increase in tolerance. Tolerance, in the modern worldview, has only good effects.

That tolerance might signify something negative--a retreat from commitment--seems to be understood by Bellah. But he is unsure and, given his faith in the positive effects of tolerance, unable to find much fault with growing levels of tolerance. He applauds the "new atmosphere" of tolerance for creating "more sensitive, more open, more intense, more loving relationships...it is an achievement of which Americans can justly be proud." But wait, tolerance is a double-edged sword. He adds: "To the extent that the new atmosphere renders those same relationships fragile and vulnerable, it threatens to undermine those very achievements." Well said, but the implications are generally ignored.

More Is Not Necessarily Better. The upshot of all this is not that rights, pluralism, or tolerance are undesirable. On the contrary, no society can claim to be free without a great deal of all three. But that doesn't mean that a society achieves maximum freedom by maximizing these values. That would only be true if there were no competing values that mattered. But since that is not the case, since social well-being counts for something, as does public order, it cannot be said that the more rights, pluralism, and tolerance we have, the more freedom we have.

American society has been operating under the opposite assumption: we have taken it as an article of faith that "the more, the better." But just as having too much good food sours the stomach, too much individualism sours society. George

Will once said that the four most important words in politics are "up to a point." Lots of things are good "up to a point." But drawing the line, even acknowledging the need to draw one somewhere, is not an idea that registers well with those who have embraced the new freedom.

