

WHY TOLERANCE?

BY HAROLD BERMAN.

A CAMPAIGN has been recently launched by a few clergymen and laymen against Catholicism in America. With rare courage and fanatical zeal, if not much wisdom, they are calling their people to arms against the Catholic heresy—as they term it.

The average reader of this extraordinary call will see in it, and with apparent justice, a renewal of the Mediaeval intolerance, a recrudescence of the bigotry and fanaticism that has raged for centuries over Europe and brought endless misery to the human race, and will feel inexpressibly shocked as well as outraged by such a fool-hardy act. The French Revolution together with the Eighteenth Century Rationalism have established for us—and made it axiomatic—the principle that religious opinions are to be henceforth considered as a strictly private matter, not to be meddled with, to be neither penalized nor rewarded in the present life. This was made necessary by the rueful contemplation of the havoc wrought, for centuries on end, by man's intolerance of his fellow-man's creed and his desire to have him see the light by applying physical force to bring it about if necessary.

This, man did not consider as in any way unjust or even unreasonable. He was applying force to the material sinner—the pick-pocket, the forger, the tax evader—who have misappropriated things that are of temporary worth only, whose crimes are writ against the laws of property and none other, and could he do less when a transgression against Truth and Salvation itself—and *there can be but one truth in this life!*—has been committed?

Tolerance of error is really child of doubt, begotten by sophistication out of the general undermining of absolute, unshaken faith in the system of dogmas handed down to you by a long chain of ancestors who received it directly from man-revealed

Deity itself in the dim past. Said Bishop Parker ("In Ecclesiastical Polity" "Princes may with less danger give liberty to men's vices and debaucheries than to their conscience," and Mirabeau said "* * * the existence of the authority that is empowered to tolerate injures freedom in that it tolerates—because it could also do the reverse," and perhaps ought to do a reverse.

When Lessing wishes to plead the cause of tolerance on behalf of the persecuted and despised Jews of his day, he could devise no more effective home-hitting argument than is contained in the story of the Three Rings, only one of which was made of pure gold, but unknown to all people excepting the Goldsmith, who unfortunately was not about so he could be consulted. This is indeed the basis, the *Raison D'etre* of the new tolerance Idea that was put forth by the philosophers and the essayists of the Eighteenth Century. They *doubted all*. The claims put forth by all religious to Divine Inspiration, to the possession of absolute truth and salvation after death as well as infallibility in all matters. They were thoroughgoing rationalists and believed that all faiths were man-made and rank impostures. They were children as regards psychology and the proper evaluation of man's institutions as works of his innate genius, to grow and develop slowly even as he himself has grown and progressed from stage to stage in his physical and mental evolution. To these theoreticians all religious systems were the *conscious* and premeditated creations of scheming priests and vainglorious political leaders.

This view was also current among the early exponents of the *Haskalah* movement in Russia and Galicia, men who had imbibed their learning out of the shallow wells of the Eighteenth Century French Rationalism. This rationalistic movement, as we well know, was succeeded in the early part of the Nineteenth Century by a wave of Romantic Mysticism, itself a reaction in the progressive movement of thought, but yet an entirely inevitable one as the pure rationalism lacked the essence of emotion, the power to move man's hearts, to fill his imagination and to impregnate it with the sense of mystery that he so dearly craves. But it was this *consciously* rationalizing process that brought about the convention of tolerance, which like all conventions of our civilized life, is factually a lie but a great convenience, an essential factor in man's happiness and his survival here on this earth.

A convention is not unlike—or rather is one of—all the compromises, part lie, part truth, a compound of the two elements that

go to the making of our modern life. Each party to the agreement abnegates a part of what it considers its due in order to get a *Quid pro quo* of his fellow. Yet when it is proposed that he sacrifice that which he considers as *beyond a doubt* an essential part of his claim, then he bristles up and shows fight or resorts to an appeal to a legally-constituted Court of Justice. Strange, isn't it, that man, while carrying a dispute about property rights to a court of law allows what is supposedly his most precious and most cherished possession to be trampled upon and be openly violated by another—for such it, in the final analysis, amounts to—simply because he has been guided so by teachers to whom this object was no longer a matter of vital concern. But to the man to whom these matters retain yet their vitality as well as reality there could possibly be no *laissez-faire* in this, the most important matter in human life, while the taboo also loses its cause for existence, being only a convention arrived at, as many others have been, without any regard to truth and the love of the same, but only as a means of increasing man's comfort here on earth.

To the consistent thinker, there is a way out of this labyrinth, however. Persecution of the believer in a certain faith is undoubtedly outlawed by our sense of Justice and logic, our doubts as well by our much-modified sense of proportion. Even in penology the motif is no longer punishment of the criminal but rather the prevention and the eradication of what we consider as a false conception of right and wrong. And even so must not the persecution of that which we consider as a false interpretation of life's greatest problems cease for one minute, as otherwise the search of truth shall be outlawed from among us and the road to spiritual progress blocked for ever. As long as men are content to use *abstract* weapons only in the battles, hurling the javelins of logic only at each other and do not attempt to persecute, ostracize or otherwise interfere in the orderly calling or pleasures of the man who believes differently from the great majority and subscribes to a different set of dogmas, there ought not, in all reason, be any stigma of bigotry attached to the deed. For only thus will knowledge grow and truth emerge from the enveloping mesh of falsehood and pretense.

If our Faith were not with us just one more of the vestigial organs, weakened and atrophied by disuse, that man may altogether discard sometime or other in the course of his development, but had been a robust and fully-functioning member with well-defined

duties to perform in the human economy, there could not have been any possible talk of tolerance of that which we consider as error, and the religious wars would still be raging all over Christendom—in books and on the platform. But dogmatic religion, even to the sincerest of us, has quite unconsciously become *a thing of doubt*, a thing about which there is some hidden perplexity, something baffling and mysterious, something not realized as realistically by us, as by our fathers who were ready to fight for it.

We no longer fear so much the eternal torments that may await in the Hereafter the soul of our doubting neighbor—who, according to our lip professions, is sure to land there unless he recants betimes—but rather are we concerned with the threat of our own souls being rendered uncomfortable by doubts arising in our own minds, right here and in this life! As a consequence, we established the dictum of *no discussion* in matters supposedly of supreme moment to us, matters that really do need constant airing and a periodical re-examination!

Even the oft-professed impartial inquiry in these weighty problems is an utter impossibility, such methods being automatically barred by the very nature of the matter under consideration, but there should, on the contrary, be heat and passion and scorching flames of conviction, if not for the believer but for the doctrine which he represents. For, while these problems may be of no moment to the many for which the Pillar of Fire that once on a time had lit their way in the desert had turned into a Pillar of Dust and Ashes, they are surely of great moment to the great majority of men who find that belief is real and vital and who yet adopt an attitude of fatalistic indifference towards it.

If men were as vitally interested in having light shed into the musty closets of their faith as they are anxious to have it play upon their problems in mechanics or business, their sociological or economic questions there would be no taboo, no sacred cows, no restrictions upon discussion nor any conventional tolerance of all *religious systems* indiscriminately, while at the same time there would be a thorough-going tolerance of their *practitioners*.

This, I admit, may be playing the role of the devil's advocate and to be taking a chance of being branded as a reactionary, as an arch-enemy of freedom and progress. Yet it is but the truth, a portion of that vast code of truth so carefully overlooked by the most of us who are so blissfully unaware of our inconsistency in this supposedly all-important matter.