

## Faith-based tolerance

Posted By [Lincoln Mullen](#) On December 3, 2010 @ 11:28 am In [Impressions](#) | [Comments Disabled](#)

In a class earlier this semester, I was leading a discussion about the disestablishment of religion after the American Revolution. Because Baptists were important to the discussion, I mentioned that I am a Baptist. But after class I read an announcement from President Reinharz that, to my dismay and shame, Westboro Baptist Church was planning to protest at Brandeis University.

I am ashamed that Westboro Baptist Church calls themselves Baptists and Christians, though in an open society like the United States no one can stop them from claiming those titles. I might try to draw a distinction between them and other Christians. Though I am a Baptist and an evangelical Christian, I repudiate Westboro Baptist Church's hatred and anti-Semitism. I am proud to be at Brandeis not despite, but because it is a Jewish university.

But I want to offer something more: an argument about how all faiths can practice the virtue of tolerance. The question being asked today because of the protests, and asked often because of the Brandeis commitment to social justice, is this: How can we practice tolerance?

Let me sum up two common answers, both of which assume all religions are essentially the same. One answer is that all religions are essentially true because they all seek the same thing: love, justice, beauty, the divine. Since all religions are true, people of different faiths should never conflict. This is the message of the popular "Coexist" symbol, often seen on bumper stickers.

A second answer is that all religions are essentially false. All religions are myths without basis in material, scientific reality. Because religion causes intolerance and suffering, tolerance can be achieved only through secularism. This is the message of the "new atheists" Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Richard Dawkins.

I want to acknowledge that both answers have, in some measure, promoted tolerance. But they are not arguments I find persuasive. They fail to persuade me, because they would require me to abandon my Christian beliefs. And they fail to persuade many people in the United States, where most hold to the exclusive claims of one religion or another.

As Boston University professor Stephen Prothero argues in his recent book, *God Is Not One*, the world's religions make exclusive and irreconcilable claims. One might hope religious people might practice tolerance, but it is foolish to think that religious people will practice tolerance at the cost of giving up their specific beliefs.

We need to ask a better question, then: How can we persuade people who believe incompatible religions to practice tolerance? The answer is neither denying all religions nor glossing over their differences. We need a third answer.

People of good will in each religion can promote tolerance by making arguments based on their own traditions and addressed to their own religious communities. Such arguments will be the most persuasive, because they are based on beliefs that religious people already hold true.

What are those arguments for Jews? for Muslims? for Buddhists? for Hindus? for Confucians? for Taoists? for atheists? for spiritualists? I don't know. But let me offer arguments from the tradition of evangelical Christianity:

- Repentance and faith in Jesus are a matter of the individual's conscience. Coercion, whether by the state or by protestors, can never persuade people to repentance and faith.
- God has established a special, covenant relationship with only one nation, the Jews. Christians dwell in every country, even the United States, as "strangers and exiles" (Heb. 11:13). Just as Christians should pray that the state and society would not persecute them and would leave them to live "a peaceful and quiet life" (1 Tim. 2:2) to spread the gospel, so Christians should never use the state or society to persecute people of other faiths.
- God loves all people. He expects Christians to proclaim his gospel, but only by "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). Christians should "speak evil of no one," "avoid quarreling" and "show perfect courtesy toward all people" (Tit. 3:2).
- American Baptists have historically supported the separation of church and state. They count among their number advocates of religious liberty for all such as Roger Williams, John Leland, Isaac Backus, and the Danbury Baptists to whom Thomas Jefferson wrote his famous letter. Baptists count the separation of church and state as a denominational distinctive, because it is inseparable from their theology of salvation and the church.

Doubtless these arguments will not persuade the protestors from Westboro Baptist Church. But I hope that they will strengthen the commitment of Brandeis Christians to toleration and religious freedom. Perhaps some at Brandeis will find these Christian arguments offensive. But I hope that you, whatever religion you profess, will argue from your own tradition and persuade your community to practice tolerance.

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