

United Against Fanaticism

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Dear Cardinal O'Connor,

May I too congratulate you on this special occasion? We have been friends and allies for many, many years. You as a Christian and I as a Jew have fought numerous battles on behalf of human dignity and freedom. What we have in common is a conviction that God is God and we are all His children who must be respected for what we are. Each and every one of us is thus entitled to his or her belief, tradition, and memory. Neither of us is better or worthier than the other. My Jewish faith is as important to me as your Christian faith is to you. In other words: in matters of religious commitment, we are both trying to be as tolerant as we possibly can.

For we also have an adversary in common and his name is: the fanatic.

What is fanaticism? What motivates a person to choose fanaticism as a mode of reflection or behavior? What need does it come to fulfill, what fears is it meant to disarm in his or her life? What does it do to those who invest their energies and passions to celebrate its laws and rituals?

Fanaticism has various degrees and names: fundamentalism, integrism, absolutism, intolerance. One or the other can be found here or there — and everywhere. Bernard Shaw put it correctly: all society is founded on intolerance, all improvement stems from tolerance.

Intolerance, in simple terms, means to possess the authority to impose one's views or will on others. That is to a certain degree unavoidable and even necessary.

Teachers know more than their pupils; parents govern the conduct of their children and are in turn disciplined by policemen and judges; physicians order their patients to medications or surgery; they all tell you that they know better what is good for you — would anyone describe their attitudes as intolerant?

Clearly they are not fanatics. The authority of the parent, the teacher, and the policeman is only temporary; the one invoked by the fanatic is not. The fanatic's intolerance implies a determination to acquire absolute authority — which makes it dangerous and harmful.

The father's authority ends with the child's reaching maturity; the teacher's with the student's graduation; the physician's with the patient's discharge from hospital. Both sides know that, in their case, submission is at best a social contract or at worst a phenomenon of temporary injustice, whereas the fanatic wants his right to be intolerant to last forever.

Intolerance is anchored in the fanatic's unshakable conviction that his ideas and principles are and will remain purer, better, and loftier than all others. There is no room in him for hesitation or doubt. He has answers but not questions. He is always sure of himself and everything he says and does. In his eyes, everything is either black or white. How did Nietzsche put it? Madness is not a result of uncertainties but of certainties. Substitute madness for fanaticism and the equation remains valid. His system is hermetically closed. If there is movement it is in one direction alone: from him to the outside world. Thus intolerance is blind; it refuses to see anything but its own reflection. Remember the burning of the great library in Alexandria? It was an act of incommensurate fanaticism. "Who needs books?" the culprits explained. "If what they say is true, it is already in the Koran; if it is not, who wants them?"

A similar attitude has been adopted in political spheres as well. Your views are not in agreement with ours? Then you must not be allowed to voice them, declares the dictator. In fact, you must not be allowed to live.

It is a fact that religious absolutists are close to political potentates. George Orwell's description of the Big Brother could easily apply to religion (isn't communism a secular religion, a religion without God?). Political heresy was equal to religious apostasy: both were considered deadly sins.

In other words: intolerance may wear many masks but fanaticism is fanaticism, whatever its name and purpose.

Pushed to its grotesque limits, intolerance leads to idolatry: if what the fanatic says is the truth — the only truth permissible and available — then it ought to be protected from outside influence. If what the fanatic says is above what anyone may say, then he deems it his absolute right to claim that his voice alone is worthy of being heard.

The next step? Self-idolatry, self-worship. In due course, he will consider himself not only as the emissary of the gods but also as their peer.

Consequently, anyone who uses another language, advocates other ideas or uses other symbols is to be muted, disarmed, and humiliated.

Humiliation plays a crucial role in intolerance. The fanatic feeds his arrogance on someone else's shame. His wish is not only to inspire fear but also to elicit shame that comes from submission.

The fanatic seeks to oppress all those surrounding him. He uses political oppression, economic domination, social slavery, and, the worst of all, oppression of the mind.

For the fanatic is not satisfied with his position of tangible superiority; what he seeks to obtain is metaphysical superiority. He defines himself by his victim's pain and fear rather than by his creativity. He feels threatened by a mind or a soul that is free. Whoever questions others or himself is to the fanatic an enemy to be defeated and his mind chained.

A fanatic wants everyone to give up his freedom in order to enhance his own. He thinks he is free because others are not. For him to feel free, he must first put others in prison. In doing so, he does not realize that he himself will thus remain in jail, as a jailer if not as a prisoner.

A fanatic has answers, not questions.

Strange as it may sound, the fanatic understands better another fanatic — belonging to another ideology, another faith — than those who oppose both of them. In spite of their basic differences, Stalin and Hitler understood one another, and their 1939 non-aggression pact was for neither out of character. A Moslem fundamentalist has somehow a common language with Jewish or Christian extremists: all agree that absolutism is the

answer and have problems with anyone who believes that truth is one yet the roads leading to it are many.

Hence my conviction that intolerance, a legacy of the twentieth century, may become the most serious threat facing the coming one.

Look around us: ideological conflicts, racial nonsense, ethnic cleansing, religious wars in so many lands. When will it all end?

Haven't we learned anything about the dangers of intolerance?

The intolerance some of us have seen and endured remains unprecedented and unparalleled in recorded history. Paradigmatic event or point of reference, it ought to serve as warning.

Nazism was based on brutal intolerance and self-justified fanaticism. It romanticized cruelty and ridiculed humanity. Factories and vehicles of death became instruments of a supremacist ideology and political theology. The SS saw himself as a prince, and his general a divinity: in Auschwitz, the prisoners were forbidden to look into their eyes.

How did it all begin? It began with traditional prejudice, bigotry, and anti-Semitism. It began with the senseless attitude of legally inflicting various punishments on entire communities. The Slavs. The Gypsies. The sick and the old. The Communists, the Socialists, the Freemasons, all considered enemies of the National-Socialist State. And of course, the Jews. It was legal to hate Jews and torture them. The Law of the land wanted their annihilation. It began with words and ended in Birkenau.

And so, dear Cardinal O'Connor, we know at least one lesson that can be drawn from those times.

We have learned that political fanaticism aims at destroying humanity as well as its creator. That is true of religious fanaticism too. Does it mean that we must give up on politics

and religion? Quite the contrary: we must work harder to safeguard their moral and spiritual dimensions.

How are we to convince our fellow men and women that the opposite of intolerance is not necessarily tolerance but humaneness? The human being in all of us must reject the false notion that one nation alone, one religion alone, one philosophy alone has the monopoly over definitive answers to essential questions.

Whatever our origins and beliefs, we are all worthy of redemption for we are all children of the same father. Why did God create one man alone in the beginning? It was to teach his descendants lessons of humility and equality. So that no one could claim to be superior or worthier than others: the king may not say "I am a son of kings" and the believer "I am the son of believers." We are all Adam's children. None of us is superior or inferior to another.

I a Jew and you a Christian can walk together and work together for the betterment of humanity.