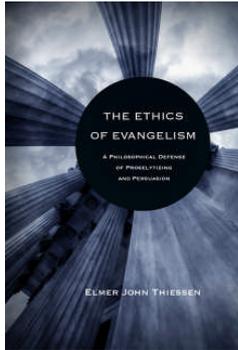


BOOK EXCERPT



*The Ethics of Evangelism:
A Philosophical Defense of
Proselytizing and Persuasion*

Available April 2011

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Is Proselytizing Intolerant?

Making exclusive truth claims is viewed as intolerant by many people. Arrogance and the denigrating of other faiths are also often interpreted as expressions of intolerance. . . .

The key problem with this objection to proselytizing is that it rests on some misconceptions about the nature of tolerance. A look at the history of the notion of tolerance illustrates the problem. The promotion of tolerance as a virtue is of relatively recent origin. Tolerance is not identified as a virtue by Aristotle, or by the Stoics, or by St. Thomas Aquinas. Indeed, prior to the Enlightenment, tolerance was seen as a weakness, or as an expression of cowardice, that is, a lack of commitment to one's professed beliefs. Today it is seen as a virtue. This shift in evaluations should cause us at least to question our contemporary attitudes to tolerance. Maybe the contemporary preoccupation with tolerance, and our seeing it as the central—if not the only virtue—is mistaken. Lest I be misunderstood, let me hasten to add that I do place a high value on tolerance. My own Mennonite ancestors were burned at the stake in the sixteenth century, routed in the seventeenth and forced to emigrate twice in subsequent centuries. There were some very good reasons behind the emphasis on tolerance that arose during the Enlightenment. The religious wars of the time were not pretty, and there was a desperate need for religious adherents to learn to tolerate each other.

But what exactly needed to be tolerated during that stormy period of history with its religious wars? Religious adherents needed to learn to tolerate each other. The traditional modern notion of tolerance had to do fundamentally with *persons*, not with *ideas*. David Heyd captures this emphasis well when he describes tolerance as requiring “a perceptual shift: from beliefs to the subject holding them, or from actions to their agent.” Tolerance requires that we distinguish between beliefs and the believer, and it allows us to evaluate the opinions and beliefs of another in abstraction from the subject holding them. Toleration is therefore a subcategory of respect, which in the end will lead to restraint in how one responds to that with which one disagrees. Today, unfortunately, tolerance has come to be associated primarily with ideas, not persons.

Another fundamental shift in meaning has occurred with regard to the notion of tolerance. The traditional concept of tolerance meant only to endure, to put up with (from the Latin *tolerare*)—nothing more than that. It did not mean one had to *like* something. It meant *putting up with something you dislike*. Indeed, the need for tolerance arises precisely because one doesn't like the other person's ideas. We tolerate an item always in relation to some other priority that we consider higher. We believe respect for persons is more important than fighting over a disagreement about ideas. This does not mean that truth is

BOOK EXCERPT

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not important. It has been well said that error has no rights, but people do. That is why we endure or put up with ideas and practices and institutions that we do not like.

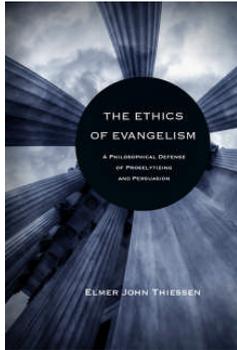
Today, however, this is condescendingly spoken of as *mere* tolerance, and it is not seen as good enough. Today a further demand is made of the tolerant person, namely, the requirement of fully accepting and even agreeing with what is different. Indeed, to disagree with someone is to be intolerant. The preferred substitute for tolerance today is mutual acceptance of each other's ideas as equally valid. . . .

So, how do we encourage Christians and Muslims to be tolerant? Not by demanding that they relativize their claims to truth. This would in fact be an expression of intolerance. Instead, tolerance and respect for other religions must take seriously the truth claims made by proselytizing religions. Tolerance must also be encouraged as developing from within the truth of these religions. As Richard John Neuhaus was fond of saying, "The reason we do not kill one another over our disagreements about the will of God is that we believe it is against the will of God to kill one another over our disagreements about the will of God." So, while tolerance might seem a little halfhearted, as Jay Newman points out, this is in fact its strength. It alone does justice to the deep sense in which religious people are committed to their understanding of religious truth. Such commitment requires at the same time a very practical accommodation to those who differ—tolerance. Nothing more (*and nothing less*) should be demanded than tolerance.

Is it possible for someone who proselytizes in the name of exclusive truth to be tolerant? Yes! It is quite conceivable for a proselytizer to respect *people* who have differing religious beliefs. Remember, respecting *persons* is at the heart of tolerance. To disagree with someone is not to be intolerant. Clearly the proselytizer will disagree with the beliefs of others. But even here, it is quite conceivable he or she is willing to allow others to have differing beliefs, and is even willing to protect their right to have differing beliefs. Being tolerant is quite compatible with trying to convince other persons of the error of their ways, but at the same time it respects their freedom and their right to believe whatever they want to believe, as well as their right not to listen to those who claim to have the truth.

—Adapted from chapter five, "Liberal Objections to Proselytizing"

TALKING POINTS



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Proselytizing and Persuasion*

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Elmer J. Thiessen (Ph.D., University of Waterloo) is research professor of education at Tyndale University College & Seminary in Toronto, Canada. He is the author of *Teaching for Commitment* and *In Defense of Religious Schools and Colleges*.

Ethical Evangelism Defined

Critics of religious proselytizing claim that such activity is inherently immoral. Those who attempt to share their faith are written off as arrogant, coercive, malicious or worse. In this hostile climate, Elmer Thiessen offers a thoughtful defense of moral proselytizing, drawing on philosophical ethics to assess the claims of his critics. He argues that given the proper criteria, one can evangelize ethically and with confidence.

How do you define *proselytizing*?

Why has the controversy over proselytizing grown in recent years?

What are some of the ethical objections leveled against religious proselytizing?

Is proselytizing a violation of individual or societal freedom?

How would you characterize unethical proselytizing?

Why is it important to note the difference between ethics and etiquette?

What are the characteristics of ethical proselytizing?

What should the proselytizer's primary motivation be?

How should churches evaluate their evangelistic efforts?

Is "friendship evangelism" ethical?

How can missionaries avoid being agents of "religious colonialism"?

Who are some contemporary figures that proselytize well?