**TOLERANCE &/OR ACCEPTANCE** by Alan Dawson Nov 8, 2015

At different times over a number of years I have heard some Unitarian Universalists (UUs) say that we shouldn’t be just be Tolerant, we should be more Accepting. Perhaps we should or perhaps not.

I’m going to be looking at Tolerance from the world and the UU historical viewpoint. I know some of us dislike history and don’t think it needs to be mentioned but I think that the last word I spoke is history and needs to be remembered by at least myself so that I know where I’m coming from and know the particular direction in which I’m moving.

We also need to define the words we use. First I will define both Tolerance & Acceptance in their many forms and then look at how religious tolerance has affected us UUs over the centuries. As with history some of us would prefer not to have specific definitions for a word but I need something specific to give this talk. We can rattle around that issue in the Forum as well as whether we would like our UU philosophy to be Tolerant, Accepting or both and how will we achieve a balance of the two concepts. For those who will not be at the Forum please think about those two concepts as they are quite relevant to our thinking about our religious situation and the pressures that have been brought about in our society at home and internationally by the vast movements of people in many countries.

**TOLERANCE** - from Middle French *tolerance*, from Latin *tolerantia* (“endurance”), from *tolerans*, present participle of Latin *tolero* (“endure”).

1. Tolerance or toleration is the state of tolerating, or putting up with, conditionally, also to suggest a fair, objective, and permissive attitude toward those whose opinions, practices, race, **religion**, nationality, etc., differ from one's own; that one dislikes or disagrees with; freedom from bigotry.

2. The capacity to endure continued subjection to something such as a drug or environmental conditions without adverse reaction: the desert camel shows the greatest tolerance to dehydration.

Diminution in the body’s response to a drug after continued use: the body’s tolerance to Ecstasy builds up very quickly. The ability of the body (or other organism) to resist the action of a poison, to cope with a dangerous drug or to survive infection by an organism. The ability of the body to accept a tissue graft without rejection.

3. The variation or deviation from a standard, especially the maximum permitted variation in an engineering measurement. [from 20th c.]

**ACCEPTANCE** - Late Middle English: from Latin *acceptare*, frequentative of *accipere* ‘take something to oneself,’ from *ad*- ‘to’ + *capere* ‘take.’

1. The action of consenting to receive or undertake something offered: charges involving the acceptance of bribes.

1.1 A draft or bill of exchange that is accepted by being signed: a banker’s acceptance

2. The process or fact of being received as adequate, valid, or suitable: you must wait for acceptance into the village.

**3. Agreement with or belief in an idea or explanation: acceptance of the teaching of the Church.**

3.1 Willingness to tolerate a difficult situation: a mood of resigned acceptance

I am focusing on the definitions which have to do with religion. During the past many centuries in many places there has been a history of Edicts of Toleration, one of them in the mid 1500s which specifically affected the Unitarian situation at that time.

**An edict of toleration is a declaration,** made by a government or ruler and states, that members of a given religion will not be persecuted for engaging in their religious practices and traditions. The edict implies tacit acceptance of the religion rather than its endorsement by the ruling power.

Out of the twenty six edicts that I found the oldest was from 539 B.C.: the Cyrus Cylinder, a clay document issued by Achaemenid Persian monarch Cyrus the Great declaring the restoration of the cult of Marduk in Babylon and the restorations of the temples of many peoples including the Jews.

311 B.C. - The Edict of toleration by Galerius was issued by the Roman Tetrachy of Galerius, Constantine and Licinius, officially ending the Diocletian persecution of Christianity. This is found on a trilingual (Latin, Bulgarian, Greek) plaque with the Edict. This is in front of the St. Sofia Church, Sofia, Bulgaria. This edict officially ended the Diocletian persecution of Christianity. In this edict Galerius is saying that as he couldn’t deter the Christians from worshiping their new-found God and returning to the traditional old god(s) then they will be tolerated as long as they do not disturb the status quo, the following is the last paragraph of the edict.

“Wherefore, for this our indulgence, they ought to pray to their God for our safety, for that of the republic, and for their own, that the republic may continue uninjured on every side, and that they may be able to live securely in their homes.”

**The next relates directly to our Unitarian roots in Transylvania:** 1568 – The Edict of Torda, also known as the Patent of Toleration (Act of Religious Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience), was an attempt by King John II Sigismund of Hungary to guarantee religious freedom in his realm. It was instigated by Ferenc Dávid at the Diet of Torda. Specifically, it broadened previous grants (to Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists) to include the Unitarian Church, and allowed toleration (not legal guarantees) for other faiths.

The edict speaks of preachers and congregations, not of individuals, and it does not guarantee the free exercise of personal religious conscience. Nevertheless, what is striking about this edict is the universality of its language, which owes much to the influence of Ferenc Dávid, and goes beyond any previous edict. It helped foster toleration as a notion beyond mere political expedience, and helped pave the way for the remarkably tolerant regime of the Calvinist Prince Bethlen Gábor of Transylvania, when (for example) Jews were relieved of the requirement of wearing the Star of David.

In the near term, however, the Edict of Torda sparked a backlash from opposing political forces: King John II Sigismund was replaced, and subsequent edicts revoked the Edict of Torda. Dávid, who went on to teach that praying to Christ is an error (nonadorantism), split the Unitarians and jeopardized their legal protection. He was convicted of heresy and died in prison under the ascendancy of the Roman Catholic Church and the rule of Prince Kristóf Báthory.

**The Maryland Toleration Act (1649)**

The Maryland Toleration Act, also known as the Act Concerning Religion, was a law mandating religious tolerance for Trinitarian Christians. Passed on April 21, 1649 by the assembly of the Maryland colony, in St. Mary's City. It was the second law requiring religious tolerance in the British North American colonies and created one of the pioneer statutes passed by the legislative body of an organized colonial government to guarantee any degree of religious liberty. Specifically, the bill, now usually referred to as the Toleration Act, granted freedom of conscience to all Christians. (The colony which became Rhode Island passed a series of laws, the first in 1636, which prohibited religious persecution including against non-Trinitarians; Rhode Island was also the first government to separate church and state.) Historians argue that it helped inspire later legal protections for freedom of religion in the United States. The Calvert family, who founded Maryland partly as a refuge for English Catholics, sought enactment of the law to protect Catholic settlers and those of other religions that did not conform to the dominant Anglicanism of Britain and her colonies.

**And now Acceptance**

I am going to repeat the definition of acceptance as related to religion:

**3. Agreement with or belief in an idea or explanation: acceptance of the teaching of the Church.**

Now acceptance is fundamental to the core dogma of most Abrahamic religions: the word "Islam" can be translated as "acceptance", "surrender" or "voluntary submission", and Christianity is based upon the "acceptance" of Jesus of Nazareth as the "Christ" and could be compared to some Eastern religious concepts such as Buddhist mindfulness and Buddhism's first noble truth, "All life is suffering", which invites people to accept that suffering is a natural part of life.

The term "Kabbalah" means literally acceptance. Minority groups in society often describe their goal as "acceptance", wherein the majority will not challenge the minority's full participation in society. A majority may be said (at best) to "tolerate" minorities when it confines their participation to certain aspects of society.

Religions and psychological treatments often suggest the path of acceptance when a situation is both disliked and unchangeable, or when change may be possible only at great cost or risk.

So where are we today? As I mentioned earlier with the movement of so many people around our planet who are from different cultural and religious roots and the fear that our politicians have tried to introduce in us in relating to the newcomers, less tolerance and non-acceptance, seems to have surged, although in Canada with the change in the political party in charge this may lead to an easing of these attitudes.

The use of fear in such a generalized way to cover a whole group of people rather than the specific fear we may have about fanatics/ extremists of every type is despicable. I’ve often wondered what a fanatic UU might look like. I still can’t quite imagine it.

As UUs we pride ourselves on our tolerance in that we accept that other religious groups have different ways concerning their deeply held values and principles and we here in North America have developed our own set of principles which we hope gives us a positive direction for how we conduct ourselves in our society, at the same time there are some of those groups whose values and principles are antithetical to ours. For myself, given this dichotomy in values and principles I could only tolerate but not accept that group because from a religious point of view if I accept then I become one of them… which is too big a dilemma as I definitely espouse UU Values and Principles.

What can we make of this when so many of us consider ourselves Christian UUs, Humanist UUs, Buddhist UUs, Muslim UUs, Jewish UUs and so on. Where does this leave UUs? I think that within the writings of those other religions are values and principles from which we can pick and choose those that are compatible with our own Seven Principles but if we had to assent to those of a fanatical group within the other religion it would be completely unacceptable.

Tolerant, yes. Acceptable, No.

I hope that I have given you all something to consider and for those of you who are staying for the Forum bring your comments, ideas and discontent with what I have said today.

Thank you!!

**Postscript: A Unitarian Fanatic**

If anyone would like to know what a Unitarian fanatic/extremist might look like, you can use this link, or search the Web for a very good piece of humour by Jon Carroll on “Unitarian Jihad”:

http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/carroll/article/JON-CARROLL-3324002.php