

Degree of tolerance: A balanced interpretation

From the Editors in the [July 29, 2008](#) issue

A recent survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that Americans are quite accepting of religions other than their own. Seventy percent of those with a religious affiliation agreed that “many religions can lead to eternal life.” Among mainline Protestants that figure jumped to 83 percent, and among Catholics, to 79 percent. As would be expected, the response among evangelical Protestants was lower; still, well over half of evangelicals—57 percent—agreed that “many religions can lead to eternal life.” More than 80 percent of Jews, Hindus and Buddhists agreed with the statement, and more than half of Muslims did.

The figures may be misleading. One suspects that many Christian respondents, when they heard the reference to “many religions,” thought about Christian denominations other than their own, not about other religions. (Methodists may have been thinking about Baptists, not about Muslims.)

Nevertheless, the poll suggests a remarkable degree of religious tolerance, and probably reflects the everyday consequences of religious diversity. When almost everyone you live and work with believes and behaves more or less the way you do, it is easy to believe that your way is the only way. But in a society in which Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, skeptics and atheists rub shoulders with one another at work and school, people start to learn, as Oscar Wilde did, that “the truth is rarely pure and never simple.”

The triumph of toleration is hardly complete. The decisions people make about where to live, whom to befriend and whom to accept as political leaders also say something about the limits of their tolerance for other religions. A sizable portion of Americans were uncomfortable with the idea of Mitt Romney as president simply because he’s a Mormon. Some of Barack Obama’s opponents try to portray him as a Muslim on the assumption that a Muslim president would be unacceptable to the electorate. Suspensions and fears of “the other” have hardly vanished.

Tolerance of others is a virtue, but it is a complex one. The Pew report is good news if it means that Americans are learning to know and respect neighbors who espouse

a different religion and are coming to have a measure of humility about their own beliefs. It is bad news, however, if it reflects indifference to or ignorance about religion.

Embracing the virtue of tolerance should not lead us to think religions are all the same or that all religious beliefs are compatible. Tolerance should not preclude Christians from humbly and joyfully witnessing to the truth about God revealed to them in Jesus Christ. Christians are called to proclaim this distinct truth, while affirming the kind of religious tolerance that arises from their own belief—the kind voiced by the apostle Peter when he said, “God shows no partiality, but in every nation [*ethnos/ethnei*] anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34b-35).