

All due respect: Honoring others

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [August 9, 2011](#) issue



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For the forthcoming book *Abraham's Children: Liberty and Tolerance in an Age of Religious Conflict* (edited by Kelly Clark), I contributed an essay on respect. In my view the Christian faith urges equal and universal respect, and it was not hard to find support in Christian classical texts for that view, which is now generally accepted.

A surprisingly little known segment of a verse in 1 Peter, an epistle dealing more thoroughly than any other biblical text with Christian relations to non-Christians, contains an explicit command to respect all people. It says simply and straightforwardly: "Honor everyone" (2:17). I summarized the position in a post on my Facebook wall: "1 Peter says: 'Honor everyone.' 'Honor'—not merely 'don't demean' or 'tolerate,' but *honor*. And 'everyone'—not only 'those in our political camp' or 'with our moral persuasions,' but *everyone*."

"Everyone" includes even egregious wrongdoers. I posted the comment just after Jared Lee Loughner shot U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords at point-blank range, killed six people and wounded 14. The reaction of my Facebook friends was

immediate. One of them wanted to know whether I really meant what I wrote. "Does this also mean honor the shooter?" "Yes, honor the shooter as well," I responded without flinching. "We should honor all folks whom God loves and for whom Christ died, and who, whatever else they are, are neighbors we are commanded to love as we love ourselves." The reach of God's love is the scope of our respect. As the first is universal, the second must be as well. Similarly, since God loves all equally, we should respect all equally.

But how does it make sense to respect egregious wrongdoers without condoning wrongdoing? For centuries, Christian theologians have distinguished between persons and their deeds, or between person and work (as Martin Luther liked to put it). You should respect the person always; you should respect the work when it merits respect (and you should condemn and even despise the work when that is what the work merits). Immanuel Kant, one of the main progenitors of the modern notions of dignity and respect, gave the idea a secularized version: you should respect all equally because they are capable of rational choices; you should respect only those of their choices which merit respect. Put differently, I can simply *claim* respect for myself as a person, but I must *earn* respect for what I do.

With regard to egregious wrongdoing, we respect the wrongdoer but despise the wrongdoing. Does the same distinction between person and work hold true with regard to deep and defining convictions of others we consider untruthful? Do we simply say: we should respect all persons; we should respect only truthful convictions and not respect untruthful ones? I don't think it is that simple. When we disrespect people's deeply held convictions, they often feel disrespected themselves. While they distance themselves from their wrongdoings (at least internally), they often identify strongly with their deep convictions. Failure to respect these convictions feels to them like a failure to respect them as persons. Many energetically religious people think that way.

Is it possible to respect not merely people whose convictions we reject but, in some cases, these very mistaken convictions themselves? In some cases, yes, but cases in which respect for mistaken convictions of others would be inappropriate are obvious. Had Loughner had an elaborate philosophy justifying his shooting rampage, we would hardly want to respect it. Should we treat an overarching interpretation of life with which we fundamentally disagree—including major religions—in the same way?

We can be more generous without being any less truthful, and we should be. Some readers of the *Christian Century* will know that my Christian convictions run deep and that at the same time I am a fan of Friedrich Nietzsche. Arguably, there are very few thinkers more anti-Christian than Nietzsche. He concluded his intellectual autobiography, *Ecce Homo*, with the challenge: "Have I been understood?—*Dionysus against the Crucified*." His philosophy is as far from the way of Jesus Christ as Dionysus, the god of libidinal revelry, is from the Crucified, the God of sacrificial love. And yet I respect not just Nietzsche as a person (with all his warts) but his philosophy as well. Moreover, I do so while completely disagreeing with him. Why do I respect his philosophy? His thinking is imaginative and stringent, his writing rhetorically powerful; some of his insights are deep, and his overall position is seductively compelling—so compelling that when I have doubts about the Christian faith, I am tempted to become a Nietzschean!

Might we not be able to show a similar kind of respect to world religions other than our own? After all, Christians are not likely to disagree with any of them more than they disagree with Nietzsche, and these religions have oriented the lives of millions of people through the centuries. I see no reason why, for instance, a Christian might not fully and unqualifiedly affirm the doctrine of the Trinity as true but still respect the nontrinitarian monotheism of Jews and Muslims. A Christian would then respect both them as persons and their most basic religious conviction. And just because we respect them and their views, we will argue with them about those views.

Notice the obvious: this is not a proposal for respect for world religions on the dubious ground that "all religions are at the bottom all the same." It is a proposal for respect while insisting that 1) religions make truth claims and that 2) their truth claims are often incompatible.