

When Tolerance Becomes Intolerable: The Dilemma of the Secular Mindset

Recently, Pepsi released an advertisement that resulted in a frenzy of outrage. In case you missed it, I'll fill you in.

In just under three minutes, we (the viewers) are plunged into a gag-inducing short story that centers around Kendall Jenner (of Kardashian reality TV fame), who abandons her conveniently located photo shoot to join a diverse group of handsome and strangely happy protesters who don't seem to be protesting much of anything at all.

At the climax of the commercial, Jenner—having “fist bumped” her way through the crowd—struts up to the tense-looking riot police and hands one of them a Pepsi can. After a brief nervous pause, the policeman gives an, “Ah, I guess they're all right” look to the officer to his right, and a party erupts.

What I found surprising about this commercial was not the staggering amount of stereotypes Pepsi managed to cram into three minutes, or the homage to “king tolerance,” but rather the intense negative reaction the ad received.

Within 48 hours, the video got nearly 1.6 million views on YouTube (with five times as many down votes as up votes). Celebrities and social activists alike came out, guns blazing, and denounced the ad as “tone deaf” and “trash.” The ad was so strongly criticized that it was pulled by Pepsi the same day it released. Later, the company said in a candid statement, “Clearly we missed the mark.”

As I watched this drama unfold, I couldn't help but wonder: Did tolerance just become intolerable?

In case you haven't noticed, tolerance is kind of a big deal in secular culture. It sounds noble on the surface: Every idea, all beliefs and all views are equal and should be respected by all people everywhere. It doesn't take a professional philosopher to see the self-refuting nature of this very definition. Tolerance is the logical extension of relativism, and shares in its incoherence. After all, demanding the tolerance of all views isn't very tolerant.

In secular culture, the idea of tolerance is often synonymous with being "open-minded"—a modern concept, equally riddled with philosophical contradiction, and a major enemy of truth. As D.A. Carson puts it, "Tolerance no longer means that you may or may not have strong views yet remain committed to listening honestly to countervailing arguments. Rather, it means you are dogmatically committed to the view that all convictions that any view whatsoever is wrong are improper and narrow-minded."

In my opinion, Pepsi's ad simply reflected a culture whose commitment to open-mindedness naturally produces exactly what the ad shows—a worldview incapable of judging anything, left with only platitudes and trivial solutions. This ad exposes the hollow philosophies that undergird secular pop culture today—and though the members of this culture have no one to blame for this but themselves, they aren't happy about it one bit!

After all, when an aggressive commitment to open-mindedness erodes the moral foundation necessary to validate something like a protest, all you are left with are smiles, fist bumps and soda. But people live in the real world, with real problems, and their outrage with this ad proves the inadequacies of the secular mindset.

People are hurting and fed up with trivial answers. This is a critical time for followers of Jesus to be bold. The reaction against the Pepsi ad is evidence that people are hungry for

something real. My hope is that this ad might expose the modern idea of tolerance for what it is: trite, vacuous and in total misalignment with reality.

As young people today grow increasingly fed up with the incoherence and naivety of tolerance and relativism, they will come searching for real answers. In fact, they already have! As Christians, we have the truth, and now more than ever, we need to share the Gospel. We need to do so with gentleness and respect (1 Pet. 3:15) but with a confidence that while Pepsi's solution to evil is soda, we serve the Creator of the universe, and those who drink of His water will never thirst again (John 4:14). {eoa}

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