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On the Need for Intolerance

Bernard Lazare

December 1891

Tolerance is the characteristic of ages without beliefs, it is the virtue of spirits without faith.

Intolerance is the leavening of great ideas; it is the virtue of grand ideas, the virtue of vigorous and great souls. Nothing is worth as much as what we think, otherwise we think nothing, we believe nothing.

The truth of these two axioms only ceased being obvious the day it was desired to base social relations on mutual hypocrisy, when it became necessary to forgive our neighbor's vices in order to forget our own. And so now the reproach of intolerance has become the most terrible one that can be addressed to any man who, due to the exaltation and affirmation of his own opinions, tends to trouble the customary peace.

From this time forward, any policy that doesn't benevolently assure that all forms of government are good, the apostle who doesn't salute the rival religion with good-nature, the critic who refuses to speak of all works with the same banal indifference, all of these will receive nothing but the hatred of their fellow citizens, offended in their repose and tranquility.

It is possible that tolerance is the obligation of he who judges. He who seeks the beautiful wherever it is capable of showing

itself can find it in Shakespeare and Alighieri, in Goethe and Rabelais. But wasn't it Goethe's duty to admit to be beautiful only that which Goethe saw? And what powerful reason could have incited him to write "Faust" if he had perceived alongside this poem something of an equal beauty. The artist must be intolerant, just as the philosopher is intolerant, the sociologist is intolerant, and the priest is intolerant.

No being animated by a sincere faith, valiant and forward looking will admit there is a better or even equivalent faith. If he admits there's a better one, why didn't he choose it? And if he preferred a mediocre ideal to a superior one isn't he like a poor madman who casts aside an inestimable perfume in order to satisfy himself with a vague odor? If he conceives of a faith equivalent to his he can only decide to choose by virtue of considerations exterior to that very faith, and in truth he will be without convictions or belief.

Nothing that has been great in this world was founded with tolerance, and sectarians alone have been creators. Can you imagine the fathers of the Catholic church making room for the pontiffs of Cybele and Origenus saying to Celsius: "Maybe we're both right." Do you see Luther saying to the Pope: "We can come to an agreement," and the Jacobins of '93 murmuring to the émigrés: "Everyone is right." In the symbolic debate between Queen Atahalie and the young Joas, it's Joas who is in the right: "He alone is God, Madame, and yours is nothing," he says. Only our ideal is god, the others are nothing. So every spirit must deny and reject that which makes it suffer and can only admit thoughts that do not contradict its norm. This is the vital condition for its dreams and their realization.

Nevertheless, reasons have not been lacking for those who advocate tolerance, and they can be reduced to two kinds, and their probability has their source in two errors.

There is no absolute Beauty, it is said, and so what right is there to condemn and pursue certain forms? In accepting this negation of the eternal idea of Beauty – which must yet be

justified – it is easy to see that this motive can only be put forward by a fool or a sycophant, for a creator doesn't fight for absolute Beauty, or for the essential Good, nor for the eternally True, but for his idea of Beauty, the Good or the True. And so he fights for his own existence, he must be sectarian for his own preservation: his intolerance will be his safeguard. Can we ask the human body to accept hostile matter, mortal toxins, dangerous microbes? No. Why then ask of the spirit to receive disorganizing principles, to elect venomous ideas, to consent to theories enemy to its substance? And yet it is the propagators of tolerance who, as pure moralists, condemn suicide and hate desertion. If they didn't see in these two acts only the loss of a useful taxpayer or a necessary soldier they would recognize that the fall of the intelligence is much more to be feared, for no believer would want to desert if he knew how to protect his belief. And what better defense of faith if not intolerance?

It is said that for the good harmony of their common relations, in order to facilitate the pleasures of their mutual relations, men should practice tolerance. This affirmation is at one and the same time too broad and too narrow. To be sure, a government must be tolerant, for it must protect all the individuals it leads and it must see to it that it the opinions, whatever they might be, of those citizens who have accepted its supremacy be respected. That is, it must scrupulously tolerate the various intolerances of its constituents. But sects and parties don't have the same obligations vis-à-vis the government, since many profess dogmas opposed to the constituted dogmas in power. A government that persecutes both Catholicism and anarchism is as illogical as a government that persecutes Free-masonry and atheism, for it fails in its most obvious obligation, which is to not favor any group of individuals at the expense of another group, and to establish the best possible equilibrium between the different confessions.

In the same way tolerance is indispensable to the scholar and the scientist, for among them intolerance would be an ab-

surd attitude since it would consist in denying by virtue of *a priori* principles the notions furnished by experience. Since the scholar can only base his hypotheses on the exact observation of phenomena it is not permitted him to reject those facts that contradict his acquired notions.

As for philosophical, sociological, religious, or artistic tolerance, they are all worthy of condemnation and even contempt, for in the last analysis they are nothing but a manifestation of skepticism. Those who with admiration are called the Tolerant are those whose weak souls have never arrived at a belief of any kind: once M. Voltaire, today M. Renan. All those on the contrary who labor, all the daring ones, the innovators were fanatics and intolerant; all those who want to innovate and create must be intolerant and fanatics. They must chase far from themselves any idea, any vision hostile to their dream, any dogma that negates the ideal they want to pursue and that they hope to reach. They should fight for the existence of their idea the same way they'd fight for the preservation of their energy, the same way they'd fight for life. They shouldn't listen to the indifferent or fools, and they should know that the day they renounce their attitude, the day they renounce the defense of the ivory tower in which they've enclosed their dream, they will lose any power of seeing it succeed.

Whoever you might be, young people: atheists or Catholics, conservatives or anarchists, naturalists, psychologists or symbolists, if your faith is sincere, if you haven't chosen them for reasons you can't confess to or that are low, but rather freely and in keeping with the natural disposition of your spirit, be intolerant!