

This review by Paul Lusk of two titles appeared under the title **Help Tolerance Thrive** in *Evangelicals Now* in June 2008

THE QUEST FOR TRUE TOLERANCE

Searching for a tolerance that does not make society sick

By Stephen McQuoid

Day One Publications

172 pages. £8.00 ISBN 978-1-84625-081-1

TOLERANCE AND TRUTH

The Spirit of the Age or the Spirit of God?

Edited by Angus Morrison

Introduction by D.A. Carson

Rutherford House.

178 pages. £14.99 ISBN 978-1-904429-12-8

In matters of religion we all know what we mean by 'tolerance'. In a tolerant society everyone is free to follow, and promote, his/her faith. We Christians mostly like to think of ours as a faith that helps tolerance thrive.

But it was not always so. We do well to recall the centuries when Christian states were violently intolerant of 'heresy', while some Muslim territories protected Christian and Jewish minorities.

In recent years Josh McDowell, Ken Ham and Don Carson have argued that the old idea of tolerance — which says that all voices should be heard freely — has given way to a 'new tolerance'. This new definition of tolerance, says Ham, claims that 'all values, all beliefs, all lifestyles, all truth claims are equal' and this new definition calls anyone who disagrees 'intolerant'. In 2004, Carson gave two brilliantly funny lectures (available on the internet) showing this so-called new tolerance to be extremely intolerant.

Into this debate comes Stephen McQuoid. At the heart of his '*quest for true tolerance*' is a 'new vision for tolerance' where he identifies eight characteristics of true tolerance. These patiently recognise the rights of all to hold strong convictions and to argue for these within accepted limits. McQuoid contrasts that with what he calls 'liberal tolerance' which is the same as the 'new tolerance' identified by Carson and others. Stephen McQuoid then applies his case to three areas: religious diversity, science and sexual ethics. He puts his case clearly and writes well.

Tolerance and Truth brings together nine scholarly papers presented to the Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference on Truth and Tolerance, 'Christian Doctrine in a Post-Christian Society', as long ago as 1999. It was chaired by the late David Wright, whose doctoral student, the Rev. Angus Morrison, has edited the collection for publication. Don Carson adds a short introduction.

Only two of the papers actually tackle the issue of 'tolerance'. The other seven address various aspects of the Christian task in a world that has parted company with any shared endorsement of Christianity as 'truth' but is also increasingly doubtful about scientific materialism as the alternative. So the collection invites us into the territory of 'postmodernist epistemology'. Stephen N. Williams calls for a demonstration of 'moral passion' that rejects the postmodern options of either fanaticism or non-commitment. John Webster looks to the drama of God's work in history, climaxing in Christ's return, to define the 'space' in which human beings create their identities as moral actors. J. Andrew Kirk recalls that the early church, though an apparently 'inconsequential' feature of a pluralistic and globalised society, succeeded by out-thinking, outliving and outdying its

generation: he challenges today's faithful to point to revelation as an 'indispensable necessity for the avoidance of ontological and ethical nihilism'. Other essays are by Trevor Hart (on recognising the work of the spirit); Henri Bocher (on identifying sin in a 'victim-based culture'); Michael S. Northcott (arguing that a Christian understanding of 'good' based on mutual obligation is superior to an individualistic rights-based framework); and David Ferguson (on the importance of maintaining spiritual disciplines).

Contributions by the late Colin Gunton and Paul Helm deal with 'tolerance' in the context of what Helm calls 'epistemological uncertainty' — we cannot claim absolute certainty that we 'know' the truth about God. Gunton shows why this is so — God is unknowable and some Christian truths are not 'propositions' that can be examined with evidence and logic; some truths are revealed only to the faithful; if we think we are saved by 'knowledge' then we are Gnostics, not Christians.

The two writers reach opposite conclusions about the implications of all this for 'tolerance'. For Helm, uncertainty makes the case for tolerance: a tolerant society encourages a quest for truth that is otherwise less likely to be found and shared. Gunton thinks that the Christian understanding of truth requires a submission both to gospel revelation and to the church as a traditional institution, and such submission is an offence against modern 'political correctness', which will result in persecution of believers. Jesus Christ, says Gunton, 'was not a tolerant man' — this he finds revealed in Matthew 23 by the powerful denunciation of the Scribes and Pharisees as 'hypocrites'.

Don Carson's introduction quotes and endorses Gunton's conclusion as the main point of the collection. This is interesting. Christ's denunciation of religious hypocrisy was not 'intolerant' unless we define tolerance as so-called 'new tolerance' or 'liberal tolerance' — meaning that being 'tolerant' means giving no offence — rather than as McQuoid's 'true tolerance', which gives all the right to robust disputation. In using his short introduction to this complex academic collection to endorse Gunton's gloomy conclusion, Don Carson seems to be letting us know that he has given up the fight for 'true tolerance'. Has he decided instead that, in today's world, tolerance is merely a supine acceptance of falsehood and hypocrisy?