

Lessons on Tolerance from the Ancient World

John Gee, Professor, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, US

ABSTRACT

Talk about tolerance has increased in recent years. In English, the frequency of the usage of the term “tolerance” has increased five-fold in the last century. While tolerance is still pursued as a desirable goal, it seems no closer to achievement in practice. In part that is because there is some disagreement about what tolerance is. This paper will examine three illustrations pertaining to tolerance from ancient Egypt: The Tod Inscription of Sesostris I, P. BM EA 10508, and P. Oxyrhynchus 3929. Jan Assmann has put forward the thesis that monotheistic religions tend toward intolerance and are the root of religious violence. The Sesostris Inscription illustrates the validity of his thesis. P. BM EA 10508 illustrates tolerance in a political situation. P. Oxyrhynchus 3929 helps show the consequences of extending tolerance.

INTRODUCTION

On the 23 of December 1572, in front of the Heiligegeistkirche in Heidelberg, a criminal was executed for a heinous crime. The ruler of Heidelberg, Friedrich III, was determined to see that something so abhorrent never happened again. Johann Sylvanus, after all, was the superintendent of Ladenburg and a member of the clergy. To serve as a lesson, his children were forced to watch as the executioner cut off his head with a sword. His crime was to doubt whether the doctrine of the Trinity, as propounded by the creeds, was to be found in the Bible.¹ It’s not, and the early fathers who decreed it knew that it wasn’t, and were at pains to explain to their parishioners why they adopted it.²

The incident is hardly one of the high-water marks in religious toleration. It is reminiscent of a number of other atrocities reported in the news the last couple of years.

Tolerance has become a popular topic over the last century, increasing in its usage in English five-fold from 1900 to 2000. The biggest jump was right around World War II.³ In German, the biggest increase was between 1944 and 1945, roughly doubling at precisely the end of the time when one religious group’s human rights were violated because the state could no

¹ Oliver Fink, *Heidelberg—Kleine Stadtgeschichte* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2005), 53.

² Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* I.8.

³ https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=tolerance&year_start=1900&year_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Ctolerance%3B%2Cc0 (accessed 19 December 2016).

longer tolerate them.⁴

WHAT IS TOLERANCE?

Etymologically the English verb *tolerate* comes from Latin *tolero* meaning “to endure.” Tolerating something, in the etymological sense, means simply enduring it. This is the earliest sense of the English word and was used from the time that it was borrowed into English in the fifteenth century until the nineteenth century. Starting in the eighteenth century, the term changed to mean “the disposition to be patient with or indulgent to the opinions or practices of others; freedom from bigotry or undue severity in judging the conduct of others.”⁵

Since the beginning of the last century two definitions of tolerance have been prominent, in the older understanding of tolerance—which I will call the classical liberal definition of tolerance—“a person might be judged tolerant if, while holding strong views, he or she insisted that others had the right to dissent from those views and argue their own cases.”⁶ The older understanding was based on three assumptions: “(1) there is objective truth out there, and it is our duty to pursue that truth; (2) the various parties in a dispute think that they know what the truth of the matter is, even though they disagree sharply, each party thinking the other is wrong; (3) nevertheless they hold that the best chance of uncovering the truth of the matter, or the best chance of persuading most people with reason and not with coercion, is by the unhindered exchange of ideas, no matter how wrong-headed some of those ideas seem.”⁷ As a result, “the older view of tolerance held *either* that truth is objective and can be known, and that the best way to uncover it is bold tolerance of those who disagree, since sooner or later the truth will win out; *or* that while truth can be known in some domains, it probably cannot be known in other domains, and that the wisest and least malignant course in such cases is benign tolerance grounded in the superior knowledge that recognizes our imitations.”⁸

The classical liberal view of tolerance assumes the existence of objective truth. This is not compatible with a relativistic world view which assumes that truth is subjective and relative. The adoption of a relativistic point of view changes the meaning of tolerance to what I will call

⁴https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Toleranz&year_start=1900&year_end=2000&corpus=20&smoothing=0&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2CToleranz%3B%2Cc0 (accessed 19 December 2016).

⁵ *OED*, s.v., *tolerate*.

⁶ D. A. Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 6.

⁷ Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance*, 6-7.

⁸ Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance*, 11.

a progressive view of tolerance. This view assumes “that there is no one view that is exclusively true.”⁹ Therefore, “we must be tolerant, not because we cannot distinguish the right path from the wrong path, but because all paths are equally right.”¹⁰ Then “intolerance is no longer a refusal to allow contrary opinions to say their piece in public, but must be understood to be any questioning or contradicting the view that all opinions are equal in value, that all worldviews have equal worth, that all stances are equally valid. To question such postmodern axioms is by definition intolerant. For such questioning there is no tolerance whatsoever, for it is classed as intolerance and must therefore be condemned. It has become the supreme vice.”¹¹

Discussions about tolerance thus can often become exercises in the fallacy of equivocation, where the same term is allowed to change meanings in the course of discussion. Since at least part of the problem is determining what is tolerant in which definition, I will attempt to be clear about which definition I am using.

Finally, in the course of the National Survey of Youth and Religion the researchers noted that when many young people say they are being tolerant “what they are really, if unintentionally, saying is, ‘I don’t care enough about what you think or believe to pay it any attention. Your view doesn’t make any difference, it doesn’t deserve to be taken seriously.’”¹² So for many in the population at large, tolerance is simply a respectable name for apathy. From this point of view, “to express one’s own moral view is thus synonymous with dominating and controlling others, a kind of pathology that violates other people’s dignity and rights.”¹³ Such young adults “have not been taught well how to differentiate between strong moral and religious claims that should be tolerated, if not respected, and those that deserve to be refuted, rejected, and opposed. Very few have been given the reasoning tools and skills to discern such important differences. As a result, many emerging adults simply end up trying to completely avoid making strong moral claims themselves, as well as avoiding criticizing the moral views of others. . . . But what few of them seem to realize is that such a position makes it impossible to rationally evaluate or criticize any moral wrong, including the horrific destruction and violence that helped drive them

⁹ Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance*, 11.

¹⁰ Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance*, 11.

¹¹ Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance*, 12.

¹² Christian Smith, Kari Christofferson, Hillary Davidson, and Patricia Snell Herzog, *Lost in Transition: The Darker Side of Emerging Adulthood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 67-68

¹³ Smith, et al., *Lost in Transition*, 24.

to this tolerant position in the first place. That is a problem.”¹⁴

Among people with such a mindset Christianity is seen as particularly intolerant, in part because it can express strong views. Another reason has to do with Christian scriptures discussing tolerance. Older English translations of the Bible do not use the word *tolerate*. Translations from the last century, however, do. In Revelation 2:2, Jesus commends the saints at Ephesus because “I know that you cannot tolerate evil people” (Revelation 2:2 International Standard Version). Yet Jesus also tells the saints at Thyatira: “I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and who teaches and leads my servants to practice immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols” (Revelations 2:20 International Standard Version). According to these scriptures Jesus did not think that tolerance of iniquity or evil either in practice or in teaching was a good thing. There is a difference, of course, between tolerance of evil and tolerance of people but that distinction seems to be lost on those who view Christianity as intolerant.

THE TOD INSCRIPTION OF SESOSTRIS I

So, is intolerance endemic to Christianity, or monotheism in general? That is the thesis of my estimable colleague Jan Assmann.

Assmann is concerned with what he called the “Mosaic distinction,” a distinction he sees as arising from the story of the Exodus, which he sees as fictional. Assmann sees the account of Exodus going back to the “Monotheismus der Treue” the “monotheism of loyalty,”¹⁵ manifested by covenants: “In the idea of covenant and loyalty are found the specifics of biblical monotheism.”¹⁶ These covenants and loyalty to them are important, rather than the law because “laws are not true or false, rather binding and compulsory.”¹⁷ So Assmann does not see the law as a problem but rather the covenant, and a god who would set up that covenant. “That is the God that distinguishes between friend and foe and rewards the one with his favor and the other with his wrath. Wrath and fear belong to this covenant just as love and mercy, even though love

¹⁴ Smith, et al., *Lost in Transition*, 26-27.

¹⁵ Jan Assmann, *Exodus: Die Revolution der Alten Welt* (München: C. H. Beck, 2015), 113.

¹⁶ Assmann, *Exodus*, 113: “In dem Gedanken des Bundes und der Treue liegt das Spezifische des biblischen Monotheismus.”

¹⁷ Assmann, *Exodus*, 113: “Die Gesetze sind nicht wahr oder falsch, sondern bindend und verpflichtend.”

outnumbers wrath many hundreds of times.”¹⁸ That, according to Assmann, is the source of violence and intolerance: “The difference between friend and foe always comes quite plainly from this source, along with the problem of intolerance and violence.”¹⁹ So, for Assmann, the Mosaic covenant is a problem. The covenant leads to holy war and “holy war is a war of extermination, from which no spoils may be taken, rather all the spoils of war will be dedicated as an offering to God, according to whose assignment the war is conducted and upon whose support all is dependent.”²⁰

Assmann sees this distinction as intrinsic to monotheism. “To monotheism belongs the conflict, that at the very least in the western world constitutes the secret motor of history. . . With monotheism come intolerance, conflict, argument and violent oppression into the world.”²¹ He sees the story of Moses as “a dislocated memory of Akhenaten.”²² “It is important to realize that we are dealing here with a strong and mutual loathing that is rooted not in idiosyncratic aversions of Jews and Egyptians but in the Mosaic distinction as such, which was originally Akhenaten’s distinction.”²³ “The Amarna religion has to be counted among the revolutionary forms of monotheism. It opposed tradition in the most violent forms of negation, intolerance, and persecution.”²⁴ “The temples were closed, the images of the gods were destroyed, their names were erased, and their cults were discontinued.”²⁵ Because Assmann sees in the Amarna period “the first outbreak of a purely religious conflict in the historical records,”²⁶ and because this coincides with Akhenaten’s introduction of a type of monotheism, Assmann sees violence as inherent in monotheism.

¹⁸ Assmann, *Exodus*, 113: “Das ist der Gott, der zwischen Freund und Feind unterscheidet und dem einen seine Huld, dem anderen sein Zorn zuwendet. Zorn und Furcht gehören zu diesem Bund genauso wie Liebe und Gnade, auch wenn die Liebe den Zorn vielhundertfach überwiegt.”

¹⁹ Assmann, *Exodus*, 114: “Immerhin aber stammt die Unterscheidung von Freund und Feind ganz offensichtlich aus dieser Quelle, und damit auch das Problem von Intoleranz und Gewalt.”

²⁰ Assmann, *Exodus*, 115: “Der Heilige Krieg ist ein Vernichtungskrieg, bei dem keine Beute gemacht werden darf, sondern die gesamte Kriegsbeute dem Gott zum Opfer geweiht wird, in dessen Auftrag der Krieg geführt und auf dessen Unterstützung alles gesetzt wird.”

²¹ Assmann, *Exodus*, 326: “Zum Monotheismus gehört der Konflikt, der zumindest in der von ihm bestimmten west-östlichen Welt den geheimen Motor der Geschichte bildet. . . Mit dem Monotheismus Intoleranz, Konflikt, Widerstand und dessen gewaltsame Unterdrückung in die Welt gekommen sind.”

²² Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), 24.

²³ Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 5.

²⁴ Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 210.

²⁵ Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 25.

²⁶ Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 24.

I respect Assmann. He is an insightful thinker, a great Egyptologist, and a good person. So, I have quoted his exact arguments at length.

This is where the Tod inscription of the Twelfth Dynasty Pharaoh, Sesostris I, provides an interesting test of Assmann's thesis. One of the concerns of Sesostris I reflected in his inscriptions was his concern that religion be properly performed. Ikhernofret preserves a royal decree of Sesostris I indicating his concern over the correct cultic rites.²⁷ When Sesostris I paid a visit to the temple of Tod he said, waxing poetic, "What I saw there was a mess. All its walls were aflame [. . .] all its priests were ignorant of their offices, heretics²⁸ who succumbed to usurpation, those execrable ones who pervaded this land which rejoiced in their strife, wretches with nothing, each one who takes for himself, who sets fire cursing the house of god. Those who devastated this house, I snared and I did not release whether male or female, valley dwellers in the river, evil-doers in the fields, or enemies on the steps. I placed them on the brazier. They were a torch for their deeds; I lit them up because of it. It was a fire, seizing and burning. It was placed in the heart of god that I execute these plans. . . . He commanded that I do it. There was no one else who could do it to his satisfaction. I opened my arms (in prayer) before him, though I was a young man, a child to his father. I began by decapitating the rebels."²⁹ The inscription begins to be very fragmentary here though the remaining fragments go on in a similar vein. What is clear is that there is every bit as much violence described at firsthand by Sesostris as in the reign of Akhenaten about seven-hundred years later. One can hardly accuse Sesostris I of being a monotheist; besides the worship of Osiris already mentioned, we have records of Sesostris I worshipping Amonrasonter,³⁰ Emestous,³¹ and other forms

²⁷ Berlin 1204, in Kurt Sethe, *Aegyptische Lesestücke* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1928), 70-71: "My majesty commanded that you go south to Abydos to make a memorial for his father Osorchenthementhei, and to overlay his cult image with gold since he caused my majesty to go south to Nubia with victory and vindication. When you do these things well of performing the rituals in [. . .] of my father Osiris since my majesty has sent you. I am convinced that you will do everything to the satisfaction of my majesty since you were brought up in my majesty's instruction. You were raised as a child of my majesty, receiving the same instruction in my palace. I appointed you as a companion as a young man of twenty-six. My majesty did these things because I saw you as wise and well-spoken. . . . My majesty sent you because I understood that there was none who will do all of them except you. Now go!"

²⁸ Reading *bks-ibw* instead of *bsk-ibw*; for the term, see Günther Vittmann, "'Feinde' in den ptolemäischen Synodaldekreten," in *Feinde und Aufrihrer: Konzepte von Gegnerschaft in ägyptischen Texten besonders des Mittleren Reiches*, ed Heinz Felber (Leipzig: Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, 2005), 217-219.

²⁹ Sesostris I Tod inscription 28-32, in Christophe Barbotin and J.-J. Clère, "L'inscription de Sésostris Ier à Tôd," *BIFAO* 91 (1991) : 9-10, fig. 3.

³⁰ Pierre Lacau and Henri Chevrier, *Une chapelle de Sésostris I^{er} à Karnak* (Caire : IFAO, 1969), pls. 2, 12, 14-15, 24, 27-28, 31-32, 40.

³¹ Lacau and Chevrier, *Une chapelle de Sésostris I^{er} à Karnak*, pls. 2, 12, 16-17, 19, 22-24, 26, 29-30, 33, 35, 37.

of Amun,³² Atum,³³ Montu,³⁴ and Horus.³⁵

As much as I respect and admire Assmann, he is simply wrong when he claims that Akhenaten is “the first outbreak of a purely religious conflict in the historical records.”³⁶ Outbreaks of religious conflict and violence do not coincide with the advent of monotheism; they are older and more widespread than his dating of monotheism. Assmann’s entire argument about violence and monotheism is based on this initial observation which simply doesn’t hold. If we are looking to increase tolerance it will hardly due to start by vilifying religious groups, like monotheists. During the twentieth-century secular regimes were responsible for far more mass murder than religious regimes.

Looking at the Sesostris I inscription we can ask the question: Was Sesostris I tolerant? In the classical liberal definition, he was not since he did not respect the right of others to have different views. In the progressive definition, he was since others had questioned or contradicted his valid views; those punished were not being politically correct—the pharaoh’s opinion, after all, defines political correctness. As a contemporary maxim stated it “Do not quarrel with what [Pharaoh] wishes.”³⁷ If we consider tolerance as apathy, then Sesostris I was not tolerant since he clearly cared about what was going on.

P. BM EA 10508

Papyrus BM EA 10508 was found at Akhmim rolled together with its companion papyrus BM EA 10507 belonging to Harmais son of Petemin,³⁸ who lived, or at least died, in the first century A.D.³⁹ It was acquired by E. A. Wallis Budge for the British Museum in 1896.⁴⁰

The beginning of the papyrus tells how on the death of Pharaoh’s chief physician,

³² Lacau and Chevrier, *Une chapelle de Sésostris I^{er} à Karnak*, pls. 3, 14-15, 17-23, 25-26, 28-41.

³³ Lacau and Chevrier, *Une chapelle de Sésostris I^{er} à Karnak*, pls. 2, 27, 28.

³⁴ Lacau and Chevrier, *Une chapelle de Sésostris I^{er} à Karnak*, pls. 3, 25, 28, 30.

³⁵ Lacau and Chevrier, *Une chapelle de Sésostris I^{er} à Karnak*, pls. 25, 40.

³⁶ Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 24.

³⁷ Teaching of a Man for his Son 6.4, following the translation in Richard B. Parkinson, “‘No One is Free From Enemies’ Voicing Opposition in Literary Discourse,” in *Feinde und Auführer: Konzepte von Gegnerschaft in ägyptischen Texten besonders des Mittleren Reiches*, ed Heinz Felber (Leipzig: Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, 2005), 14.

³⁸ Mark Smith, *The Mortuary Tests of Papyrus BM 10507* (London: British Museum, 1987), 15, 18.

³⁹ Smith, *The Mortuary Tests of Papyrus BM 10507*, 18-19. A first century B.C. date for the text is also a possibility.

⁴⁰ S. R. K. Glanville, *The Instructions of Onchsheshonqy* (London: British Museum, 1955), xi.

“Harsiese son of Rames was made the chief physician and everything that the chief physician owned was given to him. His brothers were made priests without a fee. It happened that Pharaoh did not do anything except what he had to so that Harsiese son of Rames, the chief physician thought about it.”⁴¹ After a break in the text, we find Harsiese contemplating a palace coup. His friend Onchsheshonqy advises him against it: “Pharaoh has done a lot of good things for you. . . . Are you returning the favor by having him killed?”⁴² Someone overheard the plot and exposed it to the Pharaoh, who confronts Harsiese in court. Harsiese’s defense is given as follows: “At the time that Pre commanded to do what was good for me, he put benevolence toward Pharaoh into my heart. At the time that Pre commanded to do what was offensive to me, he put malevolence toward Pharaoh into my heart.”⁴³ Harsiese’s argument is that if he takes offence he is justified in taking it out on the Pharaoh. He felt entitled to more and thought that the Pharaoh had not rewarded him enough. The Pharaoh, however, does not accept this defense. He thought that individuals should be held accountable for their actions and not blame it on god. So “Pharaoh caused an altar of earth to be built in front of the palace and he caused Harsiese son of Ramose to be placed in a copper brazier along with all his people and everyone who had conspired in the plot against Pharaoh.”⁴⁴ The Pharaoh in this account uses the exact same means of punishment and the same terms for it that Sesostris did before.

In the Pharaoh’s view taking offense is not a call for violence unless he is the one taking offense.

By the equation of tolerance as apathy, the Pharaoh is not tolerant, but Harsiese appears to be tolerant. This is something that Pharaoh clearly cares about, and Harsiese apparently less so. For him, he claims that he could go either way. But the account shows that he holds a grudge against the Pharaoh for not granting him more. The broken passage that begins the story shows that he also held a grudge against the chief physician and seemed to have thought that the solution that worked with the chief physician would also work with Pharaoh. If only the Pharaoh died it would solve his problems.

This story is a literary one and we have no idea whether it is true, or based on a true story,

⁴¹ P. Onch. 1/13, in Glanville, *Instructions of Onchsheshonqy*, plate 1.

⁴² P. Onch. 2/10-11, 13, in Glanville, *Instructions of Onchsheshonqy*, plate 2.

⁴³ P. Onch. 3/13-15, in Glanville, *Instructions of Onchsheshonqy*, plate 3.

⁴⁴ P. Onch. 4/3-5, in Glanville, *Instructions of Onchsheshonqy*, plate 4.

or simply made up. This story functions in an Egyptian literary context since it is an introduction to a piece of wisdom literature. Another work of wisdom literature circulating in Egypt at the same time, Papyrus Insinger, ends every chapter on every subject with the admonition, “God is the one who brings the fate and fortune that comes.”⁴⁵ This is the argument that Harsiese makes and is explicitly rejected by the Pharaoh. The implicit argument of Onchsheshonqy is that regardless of the actions of God, men and women need to be held accountable for their actions.

The actual instructions of Onchsheshonqy begins with a list of things that happen if Pre is angry with a district.⁴⁶ Among this list is the following two passages: “If Pre is angry with a district, its ruler abandons the law.”⁴⁷ “If Pre is angry with a district, he commands its ruler to harm his people.”⁴⁸ The two passages go together. As a matter of correlation they are straightforward: There is a connection between the wrath of the god and a ruler abandoning the law or harming his people. The causation, however, is the reverse of what we would think. Instead of saying that the ruler abandoning the law and harming his people brings down the wrath of the god, the matter is phrased in such a way as to absolve the ruler from responsibility, the reverse of the argument of the frame story. The argument cannot be made in a straightforward manner because doing so would not be politically correct. We can see from these examples that the society in which Onchsheshonqy was written was not tolerant in the classical liberal definition of tolerance.

P. OXYRHYNCHUS 3929

My last example focuses on tolerance as apathy and the consequences of applying that sort of tolerance. P. Oxyrhynchus 3929 is a *libellus*; its possessor, Amois, certifies in A.D. 250, “I have always made sacrifices and libations to the gods, since now I have sacrificed and poured libations and eaten of the sacrifice in your presence according to the decree . . . I ask that you certify this

⁴⁵ P. Insinger 2/20, 5/11, 7/19, 8/20, 9/20, 11/21, 13/7, 14/2, 15/6, 17/3, 19/5, 21/6, 22/6, 23/19, 25/13, 27/21, 29/11, 30/16, 33/6, in P. A. A. Boeser, “Transkription und Übersetzung des Papyrus Insinger,” *OMRO* 3 (1922): xxxvi, xxxix, xlii, xliii, xlv, xlvii, xlix, l, lii, liv, lvii, lix, lx, lxii, lxiv, lxvii, lxix, lxx, lxxiv; François Lexa, *Papyrus Insinger* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1926), 1:5, 14, 22, 26, 29, 36, 41, 43, 47, 53, 60, 67, 70, 75, 80, 88, 93, 97, 105.

⁴⁶ P. Onch. 5/1-13, in Glanville, *Instructions of Onchesheshonqy*, plate 5.

⁴⁷ P. Onch. 5/2, in Glanville, *Instructions of Onchesheshonqy*, plate 5.

⁴⁸ P. Onch. 5/11, in Glanville, *Instructions of Onchesheshonqy*, plate 5.

for me.”⁴⁹ Tens of thousands of *libelli* were issued, only a handful now survive. The story behind them is telling.

Gaius Messius Quintus Traianus Decius was born in Pannonia (roughly modern Hungary) in the third century. Helped by family connections, he rose to be a gifted and influential Roman senator. During the third century, politics was dirty and cutthroat, and consequently Roman emperors were ephemeral. The emperor Phillipus appointed Decius over troops in Danube region in 248, and Decius proved so popular that his troops proclaimed him emperor. Decius then claimed to be loyal to Phillipus but nevertheless the two met in battle at Verona in 249 where Phillipus and his son were killed by Phillipus’s own army. Decius then ruled as emperor from 249 to 251. He spent most of his time as emperor fighting and being defeated in Danubian campaigns by the Goths, and died of a spear wound, suffering “the best and most kingly end” according to the historian Zosimus.⁵⁰

Decius would just be another third-rate third-century Roman ruler if he had confined his actions to the battlefield. As a general, Decius was a failure, but Decius had not trained as a general, he had trained as a bureaucrat and a legislator. Decius was convinced that Rome’s disastrous fortunes were a consequence of abandoning the old Roman religion. He therefore determined harness the power of religion to reinvigorate the Roman state by recommitting it to the Roman rites, thus promoting national unity. As a sign of that unity, he required all Roman citizens (excepting Jews) to offer incense and libations to the Roman gods and partake of their sacrificial offerings in public and obtain a government-issued certificate (*libellus*) that they had done so. Those who refused were obviously opposed to the public good and could be imprisoned, tortured, or killed. The intentions behind this act were noble, and its goals laudable. Yet the persecution resulting from this legislation created havoc among the Christian community.

A number of important lessons about tolerance and how it is created can be learned from the Decian persecution.

The first lesson is that, contrary to Assmann’s thesis, the violence here was directed from the polytheists against the monotheists.

⁴⁹ P. Oxy. 3929, in J. R. Rea, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri. Volume LVIII* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1991), 39-41.

⁵⁰ Zosimus, *History*, 1.23.

The second lesson we can learn is that intolerance can arise from laws promulgated with the best of intentions. In an era marked by ethnic diversity, factional division, and ephemeral leadership, Roman national unity was a laudable goal. Unity would have helped in the Danubian wars. The nobility of the intentions are irrelevant. The only reason Decian's edict is remembered now is for its unintended consequences. In evaluating laws the effect of the law is what matters, not its intention. We can acknowledge the good intentions but we must focus discussion on the harmful effects. Tolerance as apathy plays a role here. Specifically, the Romans tolerance of the Christians led them to persecute them.

The third lesson is that freedom of conscience and freedom of religion provisions are fundamentally important to protect in all governmental actions. The Decian edict exempted Jews but no other groups. Had Christians been allowed the same exemptions as Jews, there would have been no Decian persecution. Governments do not always understand how laws will affect various religions.

CONCLUSIONS

A few conclusions that I draw from the larger discussion.

(1) It is simply not possible to tolerate everything.⁵¹ The important questions are therefore (a) what do we mean by tolerance? and (b) how do we decide what will be tolerated and what will not be tolerated?

(2) In considering definitions of tolerance, the classical liberal definition of tolerance seems to provide the most tolerance for the most things at one time. Replacing that definition with the progressive definition of tolerance might seem to increase the amount of tolerance but ironically seems to increase the amount of intolerance.

(3) Apathy as tolerance works at a certain level. When one does not care who one sells groceries to, then all customers are tolerated and everyone can buy groceries. But when one starts to care about certain issues and care about them deeply, then it no longer works well. It also does not work well when one cares so little that allowances for religious reasons cannot be made.

(4) We need to be very careful about the unintended consequences of our laws and legal decisions. What was intended as a good, even unifying measure can end up extremely divisive

⁵¹ Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance*, 47.

with many negative consequences. What we pave with our good intentions may very well end up a road to hell. Human history can be a very rich repository of experience, a careful study of which can help identify potential problems.

(5) If we are going to be a tolerant society, then religious freedom is an extremely important issue. It is the barometer of tolerance.
