



2-2-2010

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### Recommended Citation

Hatch, Rachel, "Scholar Debates Whether Tolerance is The Best Approach for Religion in New Book" (2010). *News and Events*. 1343.  
<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/1343>

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## Scholar Debates Whether Tolerance is The Best Approach for Religion in New Book

February 2, 2010

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – When it comes to discussing religion, the modern-day concept of “tolerance” as it is often employed, in fact, aggravates tensions, said Assistant Professor of Religion Robert Erlewine. His new book, *Monotheism and Tolerance: Recovering a Religion of Reason* (Indiana University Press, 2010), looks for ways to challenge and thereby change the nature of discussions involving religion.

“I’ve been very dissatisfied with the direction the discussion of religion is going, as if religion is the cause or solution of all problems in the world,” said Erlewine, a scholar of philosophy of religion and modern Jewish thought at Illinois Wesleyan University, who said what is needed is a better understanding of how religious traditions actually work in order to facilitate discussions. “Really, the idea behind the book is ‘How can we get secularists and religious conservatives speaking to one another? Indeed, how can we get them speaking a common language?’”

Erlewine contends the current concept of religious tolerance creates unintended tensions in the modern world because it criticizes religiously committed people for considering their own particular traditions as true. Being committed to one’s tradition often involves the belief that it is the true religion, which inevitably means also believing that other religions are not also the true religion. However, “With the modern concept of tolerance, there is this insistence that all religions must recognize that other religions are their equals, and they have no special claim,” Erlewine said. “When in reality, part of the nature of monotheistic religions is to claim an elect status, so denying that creates barriers to dialogue with those who belong to these traditions. If you hold your own religion to be true, you hold others not to be true, or at least not as true.”

In the book, Erlewine tries to change the tenor of current conversations about religion by turning to the work of European philosophers of the Enlightenment and those influenced by the Enlightenment, especially Moses Mendelssohn, Immanuel Kant and Hermann Cohen, who attempted to use philosophy to defuse hostility toward those outside of one’s religious community while still insisting on the importance of their specific tradition. “These thinkers, especially Cohen, try to rationally account for their fidelity to a particular community while being ethically engaged with those who are not part of their community. Instead of curbing the notion of election, they stress election but with great concern not to diminish the stature of others.”

Erlewine discovered Cohen, a German-Jewish philosopher, during his doctorate studies at Rice University in Texas. “Cohen often writes like a simple analyst of texts when you read his works, but it is incredible how sophisticated his position is,” said Erlewine, who notes that Cohen’s works are only beginning to receive the attention they deserve and many of his works have not been translated into English. “A lot of works by Mendelssohn and Cohen have not been translated from German, which contributes to the fact that their ideas have not gained a lot of attention,” he said. Erlewine relied heavily on untranslated German works when writing this book.

Cohen's approach reflects a leaning toward the philosophy of religion, which differs from the basic study of theology, according to Erlewine. "Philosophy seeks to give reasons without recourse to a dogmatic stance," he said, noting Cohen "synthesizes" Kant and Mendelssohn in a way that retains the notion of election, but still encompasses a broader relevance. "Instead of treating all religions as if they are basically cut from the same cloth, Cohen's work attempts to show that an idea from a particular religion can have universal significance."

*Monotheism and Tolerance: Recovering a Religion of Reason* is part of the Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion. Leora Batnitzky, a Princeton University professor of religion and co-editor of *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, calls Erlewine's book "an important corrective to recent discussions of the relation between monotheism and tolerance."

Erlewine received a doctorate in religious studies from Rice University in 2006. He earned a master's in philosophy from Boston College in 2001, and a bachelor's in philosophy from St. Mary's College of Maryland in 1999. He is the recipient of several fellowship and grants, including a research fellowship at the Boniuk Center for the Study and Advancement of Religious Tolerance at Rice University.

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