Course Title:
What Good is Tolerance?

Course Description:
As an attempt to enforce tolerance—living and let live—the American experiment represents a radical break from ancient and medieval thought. In this highly interdisciplinary course, you will get a chance to read some of the most important texts of the past two thousand years. We’ll begin with some medieval literature to see why intolerance has been the default ethical position for almost all of human history, but we’ll also look at key political treatises from the Renaissance and Enlightenment to understand how tolerance became one of the most important values associated with modernity. How is it that careful thinkers like St. Augustine, John of Salisbury, Machiavelli, Erasmus, Hobbes, Locke, Paine, Smith, Marx, Franklin, Jefferson, and Thoreau could each take such different views of tolerance?

We will be asking under what circumstances intolerance has been justified in the past and in the modern world, and in what cases we might prefer something beyond toleration such as the enthusiastic endorsement of difference. We will survey justifications for persecution in the Western tradition, spanning the Middle Ages through the present day, with a particular interest in the rise of toleration as a founding and guiding principle of the United States. We will examine the dangers associated with difference in homogeneous societies while also exploring some ways that diversity is understood to enrich our culture and our political process. We will read a variety of highly canonical texts dealing implicitly and explicitly with our topic of tolerance, and we will discuss them in their literary, social, historical, and political contexts.

Readings/Texts:
This course is intended to fill some gaps in your education. We begin with theoretical essays by E.M. Forster, Michael Walzer, and John Christian Laursen before embarking on a grand tour through some of the so-called “Great Books” of Western thought, including Machiavelli’s The Prince, Hobbes’s Leviathan, Smith’s The Wealth of Nations, Marx’s The Communist Manifesto, and works from the American Revolution by Paine, Franklin, Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, and others, including the U.S. Constitution.

Student Requirements:
There is less writing in this class than in the others I teach because the readings are so intense. As with all Honors courses, consistent attendance and active participation are required; students are expected to keep a private reading journal which will form the basis of a series of brief response papers. There will be one shorter analytical paper and a longer term paper on a topic of your choosing. Depending on enrollment, each student will either lead discussion on one of our readings at some point during the semester, or will offer a series of three-minute “leads” to stimulate class discussion throughout the semester.

About the Instructor:
Richard Obenauf earned his BA from UNM and his MA and PhD from Loyola University Chicago. An expert in the history of tolerance and intolerance, he has argued that the roots of formal press censorship in England are to be found in earlier forms of intolerance which sought to enforce conformity, and that censorship is not distinct from intolerance, but rather is another form of intolerance.