

Oh, so what?

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By Neal Ross Atkinson

On March 17, two days after one or more jackasses scrawled "Die Jews" on a truck in Petaluma and set it aflame, I decided to wear my yarmulke full-time.

My decision was partly political, since a skullcap is about as obvious a mark of Jewish identity as you can get -- and I don't believe in victimhood or invisibility, no sirree.

But I was also thinking logically. Observant Jews cover their heads at all times, not just for prayer or study. I'm becoming a more observant Jew. Therefore, the yarmulke.

That decision was also balanced by my livelihood. I don't want to distract people with my beanie -- or worse, make them somehow uncomfortable. (Being a Jew in America is a little like being Mr. Spock on the U.S.S. Enterprise, in that one lives in two worlds simultaneously -- and must be true to both.)

But back to March 17. I don't know what sort of reaction I expected; I have several yarmulkes (pronounced "yawmukka"), so I wore a black-and-green one in honor of the famous Irish saint.

To my surprise and delight, nobody really cared much (aside from the green part, which made people laugh and was therefore good). And this got me thinking about the over-acclaimed notion of "tolerance."

Merriam-Webster defines "tolerance" as "sympathy or indulgence for beliefs or practices differing from one's own," and "the allowable deviation from a standard."

I'd like to state right here and now my belief that "tolerance" is a potentially harmful crock, and condescending into the bargain. Most people I know don't want to be "indulged" or "allowed." They just want to "be," without permission from "normal" people.

We shouldn't be tolerant toward each other's particularities. What we should be is *indifferent*.

M-W explains this as "unbiased, unprejudiced;" "of no importance one way or the other;" "marked by no special liking for or dislike of something."

I like to think of indifference as, "So what? That's nice -- but I'm doing this other thing."

In other words: Instead of wringing our hands to ensure we all celebrate each other's lifestyles, traditions or traits, shouldn't we simply pursue our own politely -- and leave each other alone?

Of course, there are people, like the Petaluma arsonist(s) and other religious or cultural fanatics, for whom this sort of laissez-faire global-citizenship won't work. And despite my unswerving commitment to the First Amendment, I sometimes find it hard to argue why dangerous extremists should enjoy the same rights they cheerfully deny others. Like the right to not be hassled by idiots.

But in the absence of an absolute behavioral standard for everybody (and for those who'd say "it's all in the Bible," please don't -- I might not use the same parts you do), I think no one sums up the alternative better than the great Texas sage, Dr. Philo Drummond:

"I am the greatest man in the world; indeed I am so great that I can afford great generosity: I encourage all others to adopt the delusion that they are as great as I. If they truly thought that they were themselves the greatest, they too would be as generous; and then we would all be able to humour each other, in peace, for none would feel threatened by the now-harmless delusions of everyone else."