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February 6, 2013: Why Tolerate Conscience?

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Title: Why Tolerate Conscience?

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2/6/2013—The Center for Inquiry is conducting a symposium on Saturday, April 27, 2013 in Washington D.C., entitled, *Why Tolerate Religion?* The Symposium of course features Brian Leiter discussing his new book by that name. The argument that religion deserves no special treatment compared to other claims of conscience sounds fair to most secularists. But listen to the rest of the description of Leiter's argument in the program—"in his controversial new book *Why Tolerate Religion?* philosopher and legal scholar Brian Leiter argues that governments are wrong to single out religion and religious demands as deserving any special legal protection. Leiter contends that the reasons for tolerating religion are not specific to religion, and instead apply to all claims of conscience—and that governments are not required to grant exemptions of any kind, religious or otherwise, from laws that promote the general welfare." If this description is correct, a constant criticism by religious believers turns out to be correct. They have always said that first the government will oppress believers and then the government will go after everyone else. Well, that progression is just what this description sets forth. It is one thing to say that everybody should be protected in a sincere claim of conscience. Leiter's general argument can be understood that way. But it now looks like Leiter's position really is that no one should be protected from any law passed by the government. Why this unquestioned devotion to the State? If we can grant accommodation to sincere claims of conscience against certain laws, why not do so? Maybe this is not really Leiter's point. But he undoubtedly allowed this description to go out. It brings to mind a variety of the statement by pastor Martin Niemöller. In this case, first they came for religious believers, but I wasn't a religious believer. But then they came for me