

WHOSE TOLERANCE?

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Tolerance holds a special place in the contemporary world, especially in the part of the world that calls itself progressive and enlightened. One could argue that tolerance is not the most important virtue; rather, it is the only virtue. The modern West tried to replace the panoply of Christian theological and moral virtues with an insistence on tolerance. Especially since the middle of the twentieth century, the rhetorical demand for tolerance has been intense. As to whether the world is more tolerant than it ever was in the past, the evidence is ambiguous.

This paper is concerned with the key role that religious education might play in the quest for a tolerant world. On many complex economic and political issues of the day, religious education has only a marginal role; it often seems powerless before the great forces in today's world. In the case of tolerance, however, religious education is sorely needed. Unfortunately, no nation has yet developed an adequate way of carrying out the needed education.

This presentation has three parts: a reflection on two competing forms of tolerance; the ambivalent role of religion in developing tolerance; and the problems and possibilities of Christianity in affirming a genuine tolerance. All of these concerns could place an insupportable burden on religious educators. Certainly, the whole venture would be overwhelming for, say, an individual high school teacher in a church-related school. Part of the task is to get cooperation with a wider public that can contribute to a religious education.

TWO KINDS OF TOLERANCE

Despite the great range of meaning that tolerance has, I think one can distinguish two main approaches. At least if one is focusing on religion and religious education, it is clear that there is a fundamental contrast in the role that religion is perceived to play. These two forms of tolerance are 1) a respect for the beliefs of other people based upon one's own beliefs and 2) a respect for people based on a skeptical attitude toward all beliefs. The second form of tolerance appears to be the safe road for politicians. The first form of tolerance has difficulty in getting a hearing. But if religious education is to exist at all, it needs to make the case for the first form of tolerance.

Tolerance of the first kind accepts the fact that religious beliefs exist and are important to people. The task of education is to try to understand what these beliefs mean rather than to bypass them or eliminate them. A strong religious belief need not be an obstacle to a tolerant attitude; on the contrary, it can be the precondition of a tolerance that respects the other person, including what the other person believes. In this case, conflicts do not go away; they are openly acknowledged, and the task is to find acceptable compromises so that all parties can co-exist.

The second form of tolerance has an honorable history supported by some of the leading thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The idea of a liberal society rested on an ideology that cleared the ground of inherited social status. One man, one vote was the rallying cry of liberal reform (they still had a few blind spots, such as women being individuals). A human being acquired dignity and the right to be respected by being born human. Human beings were not to be judged by the color of their skin or the truth of their creeds. Let each one live as he or she pleases and not interfere with one's neighbor.

This ideal is in many ways admirable. Most of us who grew up in liberal societies are not attracted to countries where there is dictatorial control and state planning of individual lives. Modern liberal democracies tolerate a wildly diverse flow of ideas, images and practices because

no one is sure what constitutes truth, beauty or goodness.

Even conservative critics of such liberties do not really wish to return to repressive regimes in which the true and the good are spelled out by officials in authority. Nonetheless, one might still wonder if a regime built on skepticism is adequate. The humans are believing animals; their beliefs are part of their identity. A society cannot function without beliefs that provide meaning, stability and purpose for people. Tolerance for individuals despite their beliefs needs to be complemented by a tolerance for individuals inclusive of their beliefs.

The great anthropologist, Claude Levi-Straus, wrote: **T**olerance is not a contemplative position, dispensing indulgence to what was and to what is. It is a dynamic attitude consisting in the foresight, the understanding and the promotion of what wants to be. **T**hus, the second form of tolerance that takes a color-blind attitude toward color and a non-judgmental attitude toward judgment is not always bad as a first step. But a second step requires examining long held beliefs of the human race which have been a source of conflict but can be a positive force for tolerance.

THE AMBIGUITIES OF RELIGION

The particular in religion is particular because it is a partial embodiment of the universal. The claim of embodying the universal is not equivalent to being the universal. However, religions in practice tend to blur the difference. Each religion in its time and place has tended to fill up the possible embodiment of the universal with its own language. When another religion appeared on the scene, the usual response of the first has been to defend the truth of what it knows. Since it views the defense as upholding eternal truth and goodness, the conflict easily become a violent one.

Christianity and Islam probably have the worst reputations for intolerance but every religion is insistent that its way is the best way. Even a religion such as Hinduism, which lays claim to being tolerant, still has a trace of the problem. If you claim to be more tolerant than everyone else, you can end up claiming that everyone else is intolerant and your way is the only way.

That statement is not intended as a cheap shot at Hindus. It is instead a description of a problem that affects many positions put forward today as **P**luralism. **T**here has developed in the last twenty-five years a typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. If one proceeds to show that exclusivism and inclusivism are intolerant, then pluralism wins by definition.² But the paradoxical result of claiming that pluralism is the only way to look at religion is that pluralism ends up being one more intolerant ideology. Tolerance surely requires an acceptance of a plurality of religions but not necessarily a pluralism that is contrasted to exclusivism and inclusivism.

The problem here is with words that end in -ism. Respect for more than one religion is desirable, but dividing the world of religion into three -isms closes dialogue before it has barely begun. Each religion is prevented from speaking for itself. All religions make some statements that are exclusive and other statements that are inclusive. Maintaining a tension between inclusive and exclusive elements within each religion is needed for tolerance between religions. Some people might wish to call such an outlook **P**luralism. **I** would call it a religiously educational search for the truth.

It was in the twentieth century that the problem of conflict arising from a plurality of religions became urgent and practical. However, many of the solutions that are offered as new have been around for a long time. Robert Wilken notes that **T**he oldest and most enduring

criticism of Christianity is an appeal to religious pluralism....All the ancient critics of Christianity were united in affirming that there is no one way to the divine. To the claim of Celsus that it makes no difference whether we call Zeus the Most High or Zen or Adonai, or Sabaoth..., Origen replied that the proper name for God is the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Origen's response may seem narrow-minded and in the twenty-first century something more must be said. However, a claim that it does not matter what you call Zeus is no acknowledgment of religion at all.

TRADITION

One way to describe religion's embeddedness in particular times and places is with tradition. The term literally refers to a handing over; that can include writings though it always includes more than written material. Tradition connotes the aural, oral and tactile as the context for writing. The interpretation of originating documents produces commentaries and then commentaries on the commentaries.

Every religious tradition is conservative in the most meaningful sense of the term. The tradition is a layering of historical eras so that each generation does not have to discover everything anew. Education in any religious tradition has to include initiation into the practices of the religion; one is apprenticed into a way of life before the writings can make much sense. That fact poses a nearly insuperable problem for a student of religion or indeed for any outsider.

The depth of religious tradition, which makes it resistant to sudden and drastic change, can also be a help to the would-be reformer. The great advantage of tradition which is as long as that of the historic religions is that it gives the chance to appeal to more than one strand in it; it may at times be the reformers' strongest ally.⁴ Each religious tradition has elements that are exclusive, which taken at face value seem to be intolerant. Each tradition also has elements of openness, of recognition and affirmation of a reality greater than itself.

At least some elements in each tradition not only allow but urge dialogue with others. In our day we need a worldwide dialogue between religions and between religious and secular traditions. Instead of beginning with a skeptical attitude, one should practice what Peter Elbow calls methodical belief. The question is not what strange beliefs do those people hold, but instead what is it like to live with those beliefs? To do that one must be willing to let go of formulas that make claim to a premature universality. That step might initially appear to be a loss but it actually opens the possibility of getting new insight into one's own tradition.

The ultimate aim of religious dialogue is conversion - toward the truth. It is important to have clear and mutually agreed upon awareness of differences. The modest immediate aim is to change contradictory statements into different but non-contradictory statements.⁶ Anything beyond that is a bonus but one that will take a long time to secure. Religious traditions rightly change at a slow pace. But the principle of dialogue needs immediate acceptance within each tradition. Christianity and Islam may be tempted to rely on their power to dominate the cultures they inhabit. But each religion has a call within the tradition to open itself to a wider world.

CHRISTIAN PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

In this essay I can only attempt to point out some key examples within Christianity; criticism like charity begins at home. I agree with John Cobb that true openness to other traditions will require that we make their history our own. We Christians will view Muhammad as our prophet as well. Being exposed to doctrines in other religions can make us aware of the absence or underdevelopment of an element in our own tradition. One thinks, for example, of

contemplative practices in Buddhism; that element is certainly not absent in the history of Christianity but many Christians have rediscovered the contemplative by way of Buddhist practice.

Christianity can engage in dialogue with depth only if it makes some precise distinctions about its most fundamental categories. Otherwise, there is no space to meet Jew, Buddhist, Muslim or atheist. Some people will dismiss such distinctions as trivial; other people may cry heresy. The test is whether the distinction makes sense within the whole of the tradition and whether it opens Christianity to peaceful cooperation with others.

I offer three examples of where there is need for a precise distinction. Each of them deserves a book-length discussion but I can offer here only an introductory comment on each of them. My choice of terms that deserve attention lest they obstruct all serious dialogue are: Christian revelation, Christian faith and Christ.

Christian revelation

I would argue - on the basis of tradition - that there is no such thing as the **Christian revelation**. The phrase was invented in the sixteenth century as a defensive term and it is an obstacle to Christian thinking about the relation of divine and human. Neither the New Testament, the Fathers of the church, Thomas Aquinas or Martin Luther speak of the **Christian revelation**. The invention of the phrase might seem to signal a modest admission by the Christian church that there are other revelations besides the one that it has: Jewish revelation, Muslim revelation, etc. But to break up revelation into discrete packages has the effect of solidifying and isolating each claimant's supposed possession.

The only way to have dialogue among Christians, Jews and Muslims is to acknowledge a divine revelation that goes beyond the grasp of any one religious tradition (a point that each tradition admits). There is a Christian interpretation of (divine) revelation, as also a Jewish interpretation and a Muslim interpretation. Each religion claims that at least some of its interpretation is true; each tradition may be right. Dialogue is needed to enrich each interpretation. Until **Christian revelation** is put to rest, the right wing of Christianity cannot entertain any serious dialogue. The left wing of Christianity tends to presuppose **Christian revelation** while neither affirming its existence nor examining what its assumption means.

Christian faith

The term Christian faith has a longer heritage than Christian revelation but its usage is more ambiguous. Like revelation, faith has an ultimacy that resists segmentation by possessive adjectives. In both Bible and Qur'an, one believes or one doesn't; there is either faith or infidelity. Unlike revelation, "Christian faith" can be found before the sixteenth century, usually as a shorthand for belief in Christ not for something under the church's possession. Thomas Aquinas nearly always uses "faith" without a modifier. The present Pope, in his voluminous writings of over forty years uses "Christian faith" hundreds, probably thousands of times. Its usual meaning is Catholic doctrine, a usage that is not a help to Protestant-Catholic conversation.

Josef Ratzinger was head of the peculiarly named Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. I hope as Pope that Benedict XVI distinguishes doctrine and faith, and furthermore that he uses faith in a way that invites conversation with all religions

Christ

The term **Christ** is obviously not to be eliminated but it needs a precise use so that Christians are clear as to what or who they are talking about. From early in Christianity the title

Christ was attached to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. For both Christians and non-Christians, **Jesus Christ** seems to function as a first and second name. Christians have every right to pray to Jesus Christ in their liturgy. However, if they wish to enter dialogue, especially but not only with Jews, they have to distinguish the name of the person they are talking about and the claim that Christians make about him. The acknowledgment can be made in several ways (for example, Jesus the Christ, Jesus-Christ). The distinction does not entail a denial of any Christian belief about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, called the Christ.

Most Jews do not have difficulty in speaking about Jesus; the topic of conversation is clear to them. Jews cannot dialogue about **Jesus Christ** not only because of connotations which the word **Christ** has from medieval persecutions but because it is not clear what the topic is. The confusion for the Jew should make the Christian wonder whether all the talk about **Jesus Christ** is clear in Christians conversing among themselves.

Christ as a title attributed to Jesus was a translation of the Hebrew **Messiah**. From the beginning there was a difference between **Christ** and **Messiah** that over time became profound. Jesus had fulfilled part of what Messiah meant but not other aspects. The early Christians challenged the adequacy of the Jewish understanding of Messiah; they did so by proclaiming Christ. Subsequently, **Christ** took on profound philosophical and cosmic meaning while the Jews continued to await a Messiah or messianic age. Today, given the quite different meanings of Christ and Messiah, it is possible for Christians to await the coming of the Messiah, while believing in Christ. In Christian belief the fullness of Christ and the redemption of the world are still in the future. The unique Christ is still being filled out by what Christians do and by what other religions might contribute.

CONCLUSION

The work of the educator is to increase understanding and thereby lessen violence. That is a daunting task in today's world where nations, cultures and religions cannot avoid confrontations. The national and cultural clashes usually involve religious differences. The secular educator is often caught between trying to avoid religious questions and having to denounce religion's intolerance. Neither tactic is promising for achieving understanding and peace.

The religious educator begins with the existence and importance of religious traditions. He or she has to be clear-eyed about the dangers and the history of intolerance involving religions. Most religious educators are immersed in their own tradition, a fact that is understandable but not an excuse for unawareness of other traditions. To prepare people today to practice their own religion, it is necessary to have some knowledge of other religious possibilities. The Christian educator has to present the greatness of Christianity while acknowledging its failures and deficiencies that should press it to dialogue.

Religious education should not aim at tolerance. It has to aim at being true to its own tradition and open to other traditions. That attitude will produce tolerance (or a lessening of intolerance) as a side effect. An education whose aim is tolerance will most likely try to collapse differences within a premature universalism. I agree with Leszek Kolakowski that by affirming such an equality we affirm the exclusivity and intolerance of every culture.⁸ Religious education, well carried out, not only talks about tolerance but is a force for tolerance. It operates at the intersection of differences that are part of human history. It does not expect to transcend the differences and create a perfect world but it hopes to lessen misunderstandings and open conversation about living peacefully together.

¹ Claude Levi-Straus, *Race and History*, 362

² John Hick in Paul Knitter, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 12.

³ Robert Wilken, *Remembering the Christian Past* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 27, 42.

⁴ Kathleen Bliss, *The Future of Religions* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 43.

⁵ Peter Elbow, *Embracing Contraries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 263.

⁶ John Cobb, *Transforming Christianity and the World*, ed. Paul Knitter (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 74.

⁷ John Cobb, *Transforming Christianity*, 60.

⁸ Leszek Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 17.