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Religious and Social Tolerance
A Theological Consideration

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1. Historical arguments for tolerance

Tolerance appears to be the prime virtue of much of the late twentieth-century English establishment. It certainly seems to dominate much of the thinking behind modern religious education. The aim is to give a sympathetic understanding of religion or religious cultures. Children may be encouraged to play at being Moslems or Hindus or whatever for a day. If one raises the problem that Christianity, Islam and Judaism at least are exclusive religions, the answer is given, 'Well, it's tolerance that we're after.'

Of course, the reasons for such aims are not far to seek. The monstrous activities of the National Front challenge the peace and hopes for harmony of our society. In a small country where over fifty million people of different hues, languages, cultures and faiths seek to live together, conflicts must be avoided. People must learn to accept one another with all their differences. The need is just as great on an international level. The phrase 'global village' may have gone out of fashion a little, but the different parts of our world are still becoming increasingly interdependent. There is no reason to expect an end to this trend, unless modern population levels and technological civilization should be wiped out by a disaster too horrendous to contemplate with anything but a determination to avoid it. Tolerance of one another's ideas and life-styles seems a necessary part of this avoidance. The results of the failure of tolerance in Nazi Germany are still fresh in the consciousness of many people, and the threat of horrendous disaster through the clash of communist and capitalist superpowers adds immediate relevance. Tolerance means not rocking the boat of civilization, which could so easily capsize with the loss of all hands.

A longer historical view of Christendom would seem to reinforce the central value of tolerance. The modern stress on tolerance developed, after all, from the experience of sectarian clashes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries between Roman Catholics and Protestants. In Germany, the Thirty Years War may have reduced the population by one third. Neither side was able to gain a victory, and toleration of different denominations controlling different German states had to be reaffirmed, and led at last to a more

thorough tolerance. In England, religious quarrels between Protestants helped fuel the Civil Wars of the 1640s. In the 1680s, the threat of Roman Catholicism under James II led to a reduction of this conflict, and made the Toleration Act of 1689 possible. Anglicans needed to prevent the Roman Catholic Stuarts from winning nonconformist aid by more generous offers. The religious wars and persecutions thus led to tolerance as necessary self-preservation by European society, which was in danger of being torn to pieces by religious hatred.

To go back to the later Middle Ages, the schism between Western Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy helped to lead to the conquest of the Greek lands of the latter by the Islamic Turks, though secular divisions in the West were often the decisive factor in crippling the West's ability to give assistance, and the temporary subjection and serious damage of the Byzantine empire by crusaders was as much the result of Venetian greed as of religious hostility. Earlier still, the collapse of the Byzantine empire before the Arab advance in Egypt and Syria in the seventh century AD was at least made more likely by the resentment of Monophysite Egypt at the harsh rule of Chalcedonian Constantinople. Religious divisions and conflict within Christendom have thus contributed to the majority of its most spectacular debacles, at least up to the twentieth century. They have brought destruction on states, and, in the eighteenth century, reaction against religious conflict led to the growth of a rejection of the Christian faith as such, which has helped to create the modern agnostic West.

Intolerance, furthermore, breeds further conflict. Some would argue that the forcible crushing of the Albigensian heretics in the twelfth-century bloodbath helped to lead to a hardening of the arteries in the medieval church, which gradually grew less able to absorb new ideas and movements, and reacted more and more with force when faced by difficult challenges. The crushing of the Lollards and the burning of Huss meant that the challenge of Luther could not be met by reasonable reform and conciliation which might have retained his loyalty. Instead, a ham-fisted effort to destroy him drove him to more extreme courses. The division of the church was the result.

2. Response to these arguments

Surely, then, it can be said that tolerance is an essential virtue. Yet there are problems. What led to disaster may have been intolerance, but is the antidote to it mere tolerance—or something else? What, first of all, do we mean by tolerance and toleration, which we take as expressing the same thing—though tolerance often means the attitude, and toleration means the related legal, political, or social state of affairs?

A basic definition is 'putting up with what we do not like.' If we do not object to something, then we could not be said to tolerate it, but to favour, support, or at least accept it. Thus tolerance is rather a negative attitude. As was said above, it means basically not rocking the boat by our quarrels. Definitions include an 'indulgent' attitude.

Now its very negativity is the central problem of tolerance. It is a rather 'cold' attitude. It merely implies a cessation of hostilities, not any positive relationship. But such an attitude is liable to be weak. It is, in a way, empty—and nature, as the old principle states, abhors a vacuum. Some more positive emotion is thus always likely to fill the place of tolerance. It may be that what is tolerated will become more positively *accepted* as unobjectionable. Those who demanded at first a legal toleration of homosexuality now expect and campaign for its full acceptance. In the argument over abortion, the legal permission—that is, tolerance—and the demand for a fuller acceptance have gone together, and the case is similar with those who fight for a relaxation of the drug laws. On the other hand, toleration may be replaced by hatred which, in the sense of its strength, is a positive thing—what might be called a positively negative attitude. The collapse of toleration of various groups in times of stress is a frequent phenomenon in history. The shattering blows of defeat in war and repeated economic disaster produced the collapse of tolerance in Germany in the 1930s. Anxiety can produce paranoia, and a merely tolerated group quickly becomes the object of attack. The Jews have experienced this *ad nauseam* in their long history of suffering. Tertullian's scornful jibe at the Roman empire's persecution of Christians—'The cry goes up, "The Christians, the Christians, the Christians to the lion!" What, *all* the Christians, and only *one* lion?'—is an attack on blaming Christians, however improbably, for any disaster that happened to occur. Toleration is thus an unstable situation, liable to be transformed by time and circumstance into something else. It is perhaps the case that tolerance of specific ideas and practices often tends to become acceptance, but toleration of groups of people tends tragically to revert to hatred.

In the case of its transformation into acceptance, toleration may destroy the previous attitude, whose unwanted by-product was hostility to a particular idea, practice, or group. Nature abhors a vacuum, and will tend to fill a relatively empty space. In order to maintain the vacuum of tolerance there will often have to be a reduction of the content, or the intensity, of the attitude which was to be limited by tolerance. Thus the violent denominational Christian commitments of the seventeenth century had produced religious war. The price of tolerance was a reduction of commitment, and the cooler piety and often religious indifference of the eighteenth century. Now this is all very well if the previous attitude was unimportant or undesirable, but if it be judged vital, then the price of tolerance is

often tragically high. The Pope's refusal to tolerate contraception and abortion is linked to a judgment that this saps respect for human life. If this link exists, then we may well sympathize with his objections, even if one or both practices should not seem very wrong in themselves. Clearly the reduction of Christian commitment must be seen by the church as a disastrous development, and must lead us to ask whether the usual concept of tolerance is the answer to the evils of violence, hatred and persecution, or whether some other answer is required to replace or at least supplement it.

This is the more true because tolerance is not in any way a central concept in the biblical story of God's relationship with man. It arose in modern times as a 'common-sense' response to the threat of disaster brought by sectarian conflict. Thus it was based on a balance of fear. It is not a result of faith, or love, though it may admittedly be linked to them via hope of a more lasting peace. That hope, indeed, is not necessarily a Christian hope. It may just want the problems to go away. The fact that fear produced tolerance reinforces the argument that tolerance itself is a weak force, since fear of a greater evil resulting from conflict is the real motive for action. But fear is clearly not a satisfactory motive for a central virtue, since it is itself very often undesirable. 'Perfect love casts out fear', and love is meant to be the prime motive of the Christian life. In any case, a balance of fear may be upset, and toleration will, as we have said above, either have to stabilize itself by a reduction of previous commitments or will be liable to be upset as people either forget their fear of the results of intolerance or come to fear the opposing and tolerated group more than such a disaster. The present history of co-existence between East and West in international affairs gives evidence for these problems.

The 'common-sense' tolerance of the eighteenth century in fact became part of a new way of thinking of considerably wider proportions, rationalism and liberalism. In eighteenth-century Western Europe, common-sense, what seemed sensible to man, was decked out as 'reason' and wisely placed at the centre of man's thinking in place of revelation. Christian faith could, of course, be accommodated to this 'reason', which usually continued to hold as self-evident the immortality of the soul, the existence of some kind of Supreme Being, and the importance of morality. In effect, this 'reason's' dicta derived from those parts of Christian faith which were held by all. It was thus a sort of 'post-Christian faith', or Christian faith adjusted and edited to fit the needs of a society which needed to avoid sectarian conflict. But such an adjusted Christian faith is not Christian faith at all. God is largely reduced to a tool, a means and not an end, and Christ is reduced to an exemplar and teacher. Ironically, when its Christian component collapsed in the French Revolution, 'reason' became as violently intolerant as any other

belief system. Liberalism ditched the dominance of the appeal to reason—too obviously a false idol—and re-stressed religion and more emotional aspects of men's being, but in other respects its central thrust remained the same. Tolerance remained central, and a man-rather than God-centred theology followed this stress on putting an immediate need of human society first in a theologically unconsidered way. Christianity as a human religion could thrive in the nineteenth century, so long as it did not attack the foundations of society but either undergirded them (Hegelian theology) or else concentrated on saving the individual soul. Other-worldliness and pietism were thus an acceptable alternative to theologies of reason and liberal theologies. Neither disturbed the problem of tolerance.[1]

Tolerance was, of course, disturbed by various revolutionary movements which felt that violence and disruption were worthwhile to produce a new order. For them it was not worth the sacrifice of one's ideals to preserve a rotten present order by tolerance. Tolerance was thus shown up to be often the prerogative and weapon of dominating groups who have a sense of security. Tolerance was usually not given to revolutionary groups from which ruling classes perceived a threat. To its other problems we must thus add that tolerance may often be a conservative force, an encouragement to let things be, to put up with them rather than struggle for change. This, indeed, is part of its tendency to 'coolness' or even flabbiness. It relates to the fact that tolerance is the offspring of fear, not love. Tolerance is, perhaps, often an 'opium of the people'.

Toleration was, then, in many ways a retreat from Christian commitment. Nevertheless, the horrors that produced it clearly preclude a mere attack on it. Its upholders did not usually mean to attack faith, and clearly the religious wars and hatred were a symptom of faith gone horribly wrong. The cure may have been damaging, but it was a possibly necessary judgment on the sort of faith that preceded it. Similarly, merely to criticize tolerance in today's perilous world is wildly irresponsible. Any criticism must be accompanied by proposals to preserve the benefits of tolerance, while seeking to avoid its damaging results for Christian faith.

3. The Gospel's demands

We may begin by pointing out more clearly that tolerance and toleration can have two different objects. On the one hand one can tolerate things and ideas; on the other hand, one can tolerate people.

Now tolerance, as described above, cannot be an adequate Christian attitude to any *person*. What is required is *love*, a more positive and active concern. Merely to tolerate members of a particular cultural or racial minority will not do. Tolerance permits 'ghettoisation' in poorer areas of cities, and insufficient consideration of social and educational needs. It may be admitted that the

upholding of tolerance has produced legislation against discrimination in jobs and places of entertainment, but more positive assistance is needed. Not a tolerant so much as a caring church and society are to be worked for. The frequent disastrous failures of the churches to provide a home for West Indian Christian immigrants, let alone to find ways of lovingly proclaiming the gospel to Asian Muslims and Hindus, is a sufficient comment on this on the religious front. Such love can, however, only arise out of a deeper and more open fellowship within our churches, an opening up and following of the 'koinonia', the common life of the New Testament churches. We must strive to make our churches more than common attendance at worship. Mere tolerance limits commitment, and discourages hard thinking. What is required is a greater Christian commitment, based on a good theology which seeks to overcome our prejudices with the proclamation of God's reconciling love to all, through Jesus Christ.

For the love that is needed must be properly understood. Doubtless religious persecution and warfare largely sprang from paranoid hatred by the insecure who felt their positions challenged. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the claim of inquisitions that their actions sprang from love—love of those who needed protection from being led astray by heresy, and even perhaps sometimes concern for the heretic himself or herself, who was to be punished in this world so that he or she might not be condemned in the next. To ignore the sincerity and concern of some persecutors is to take a shallow view of the difficulty of the human predicament; and such a shallow view, such a failure to understand and empathize with the mistakes of others, can lead to a repetition of them. Has this not occurred in Russian and other Marxism? And have not the Americans, proclaiming freedom against Marxist tyranny, themselves sunk to the violent backing of tyrannical regimes, and in the McCarthy era the harrying of left-wingers at home? Those who believe in their own sincere concern for their fellow men have turned on them savagely.

The central Christian antidote to this is surely that God's love is exercised by the cross of Jesus. The setting in force of the final goal of mankind, the ultimate expression of love, cannot be carried out by military power. The temptation narrative shows this, too, by Jesus' rejection of the conquest of the kingdoms of this world.[2] John's gospel hammers the point home in the exchange between Jesus and Pilate, which is not about other-worldliness, but the way in which God's ultimate and consummating love is exercised.[3] Luke has Jesus going to the cross with a prayer for forgiveness for his enemies.[4] He embraces the way of self-giving love and service, not the use of force.[5] Thus the use of force in religious conflict was bad faith and bad theology. The answer is not a reduction but a correction of conviction. This is backed by the fact that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries often persecuted for the same reason as the

eighteenth tolerated—that they felt that society and state were best served so. A properly Christian love of others cannot include such a coercion of them to bring them to faith or to God's kingdom, even for their own good.

Love is, of course, broader than tolerance; can tolerance be seen as a part of Christian love, if suitably controlled by that love? If so, it would seem to apply to the attitude to ideas and practices rather than to people. Of course one cannot totally separate persons from their ideas and actions, but the two need to be distinguished. The person must be loved and cared for, but one may not always love his ideas and actions. Indeed, to say one loves an idea would be a different use of the term from love for a person. Love of an idea or practice means to take pleasure in it, to support it, to agree with it. Love of a person means, in the sense of Christian *agape*, to care for his best interests, to want the best for him and act to bring that about.

A Christian cannot love Nazism, or the atheistic elements of Marxism. Nor, despite the greater respect for other religions, can he or she love—at least in the sense of supporting—Hinduism, Islam, or other major religions, though he may find things to admire and points of agreement with those faiths. If he is to remain a Christian, he must continue to see a uniqueness and finality in Jesus Christ, who is the measure of faith and the final word of and about God. The Jewish-Christian biblical tradition will not accept the syncretistic principle. Although it has absorbed elements from neighbouring faiths, the God who speaks in the Bible cannot be heard apart from the scandal of the particularity of his actions. This particularity means that he is the subject of revealing action, not merely an object of human religion.

Thus, indeed, from the same source as the particularity of the Christian faith, springs an answer to intolerance. Intolerance so often springs from man's need to establish his own position against that of others. Faith in the God who acts in and through Jesus Christ must finally trust in God to establish his own word and kingdom. Our part is to co-operate, but the eschatological consummation and unveiling of the kingdom of God in Christ cannot be brought about by human action. We cannot attempt to effect by force the end of history and final definition and solution of man and his problems. The eschatological reserve in Christian faith and action must leave that to God's universal act, and this demands an openness to the future, as Pannenberg has stressed. Our anticipation of the kingdom takes place under the sign of the cross of Jesus, as well as the resurrection, and the influence of the cross has been described above. Fanaticism is the response of a man trying to save himself or to support an idol. Faith in God's grace allows forbearance.

If ideas and faiths rivalling Christianity cannot be met with force, must we then talk of tolerance as the response to them? It may be so,

in the negative sense of an abstention from prosecution, but this alone is not enough. As has been said above, there is something cool and negative about toleration; it leaves the other alone. The merely tolerant man withdraws, in a sense, from commitment to the other, from real engagement or contact, lest it be too sharp; if he seeks to meet the other, he will minimize his differences to avoid conflict. But the problems of this have been described, and the Christian faith needs to be taken more seriously. Tolerance must be accompanied by a seeking to witness. It cannot imply a full acceptance, let alone support, of rival ideas to Christ's authority, but witness will take the form of dialogue with others. We must learn to live together and love one another in disagreement, so that the proclamation of faith in Christ is not subjugated to other considerations. If others refuse dialogue and contact, yet we must seek to witness through caring service. It may be that the word 'tolerance' needs to be replaced by another or others with less negative connotations from history. 'Forbearance' or 'bearing with' might well be a useful concept here. It need not be merely negative. Without claiming to be scientifically etymological, one can unwrap the words in a useful way. 'Tolerance' itself also comes from the Latin 'to bear'; the stressing of 'bearing' accepts the weight laid on one by the opposing ideas and actions. The 'for', if without etymological justification, may be used to remind us that this is *for* the sake of the other person, and for God, and lead us to ask how in general the other may be helped. 'Forbearance' has not the same identification with a weak indulgence that 'tolerance' has often acquired.

We have distinguished a response to persons from that to things, but of course in practical situations the two cannot be disentangled. We forbear with others with regard to the ideas or practice—an attitude which in itself is negative—out of positive love for the person, in the way of Christ. Thus we must seek contact and accept—tolerate?—a degree of conflict out of care for the other in the light of Christ. Yet we may not seek conflict, nor bully the other to faith or conviction. In the light of God's saving action, a man cannot be so brought to his ultimate goals.

Nevertheless, in preserving the peace, we are not to subordinate Christ to some other principle. Since the eighteenth century, that has often been the price of a continuation of the church's special relationship with the state. If it is the price of a special Christian position in society, then that position were better abandoned. We can seek peace as effectively and honestly from within a Christian framework as by submitting to an independent idea alien to Christian theology.

That idea found its centrality in value and belief systems which drew on Christian ideas and inspiration, but many of the components of those systems, such as faith in the absoluteness of morality, have

crumbled apart from their Christian source. Western society seems to be in a crisis today. The best way in which the church can hope to help this is not to identify itself with that society by submitting to its thought processes, but by seeking to obey and witness to the truth in Christ. Aids to peace more powerful than the classic idea of toleration may arise from the leaven of true discipleship.

4. Limits to tolerance

Yet how can we decide the limits of what practices are bearable? At what point must people be curbed, by punishment if necessary? Now, as has been said, coercion cannot assist the gospel or establish the kingdom of God. Its only possible use is to check evil and thus assist in the maintenance and betterment of an order in which men can live and hear the gospel. The biblical contrast, and yet complement, as preparation to the gospel is *law*. If the life of the gospel is an anticipation, a down payment on God's kingdom, the law is an indirect and limited reflection. If the New Testament denies the law's saving significance, that is its power to bring men to their final goal as children of God, nevertheless the Old Testament witness to law as promoting a just and caring society is not denied. The limits of forbearance are thus linked with the issues of law. Serious disorder has to be checked by the use of law, with its sadly necessary coercive side.[6]

There are, of course, clear dangers in this approach. On the one hand, law can break free from its relationship to gospel and establish itself as a totally independent principle. Even if it should not claim to control all life, or man's final destiny, still it would have become an idea and practice in fact independent of a true Christian theological control. Even if only relating to an aspect of man's life, it could create the growth of legalism, and what the New Testament attacks in Phariseeism. Perhaps the history of the heirs of evangelicalism in Victorian English society illustrates the risk. To counter this, one must stress that as people and their ideas and practices must be distinguished but cannot be totally separated, so the gospel must always be remembered and control *us*, so that even if politically we must use the principle of law, yet we must never forget that the gospel is the most important thing, humbling us, lest we become arrogant in our appeal to law. That we may use it does not mean we can boast of our own virtue. We must be on the look out for applications of mercy and forbearance, that is more positive caring, even in situations where law is applied.

The second peril is that the concepts of 'law' and 'order' have so often been used by ruling groups in a repressive way, to block the cry for justice. It was noted above that tolerance could be a weapon of ruling groups. 'Law' and 'order' have certainly been so. From nineteenth-century France to many countries today, 'law' and 'order'

have meant keeping the 'have-nots' in their place. But this again results from 'law' and 'order' breaking free from the biblical context of Christian theology and setting up on their own, in the service of some other master. The Old Testament picture of Sinai, the Judaeo-Christian paradigm of law, follows the Exodus, and reflects the concern for liberating the oppressed and caring for the weak which marks that biblical event. Law is on the side of the oppressed. The prophets hammer home the fact that a really corrupt order is *no order*. Thus the conserving aspect of law and order may be *radical* in terms of the political spectrum. What cannot be tolerated is a breakdown of order, and that breakdown includes the perversion of order in failing, for example, to show concern for man's basic needs of dignity, freedom, a proper home, and fruitful work. Dangerous and unhealthy working conditions cannot be tolerated—there must be an aim to bring safety. Bad housing cannot be tolerated—there must be a struggle to provide adequate accommodation for all. Unemployment cannot be tolerated—care for men includes their right to the dignity of supporting themselves and contributing to society. Obviously, too, the crushing of man for colour or race or language or religion is intolerable. A true concern for law and order sees them as instruments of a caring, liberating society which, for Christians, indeed reflects, though it cannot bring, God's kingdom. The state structure of law and administration must be geared to the removal of abuses and the setting-up of such a society. The limits of tolerance are thus set by a *caring* law and order which express the demand for *liberation*. Tolerance gave man a degree of freedom; liberation is the more positive concept, and is a major component of the biblical idea of love.

We may add further, as a concept more positive and more embracing than tolerance, the idea of peace. This, in its Hebrew sense, is wider than the absence of war, and includes the idea of a right and caring order, and human well-being, which to the Old Testament was linked to God's liberating love. That peace must be actively sought. 'Blessed are the peacemakers', not the tolerant who 'want a bit of peace'.

5. Conclusion

Disputes about words can be futile and damaging. The words 'tolerance' and 'toleration' may still be used, especially as 'toleration' is a term from state law. But a 'form of sound words' is important.[7] 'Tolerance' and 'toleration' must, for Christians, be 'brought into subjection to Christ.' They must be understood in relation to the message of Christ, so that they themselves can express it, and so that they are harmoniously linked with other aspects of it. If that cannot be achieved, then alternative language to help to achieve 'peace and goodwill to all men' will have to be employed.

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NOTES

1 K. Barth, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, states the thesis adopted in the two preceding paragraphs.
2 Matt. 4:8–10.
3 John 18:33–38.
4 Luke 23:24.
5 1 Peter 2:21–24, taking up Isa. 53.
6 This understanding of law can be linked with the approach of the pastoral epistles, e.g. Tim. 1:8–11. The law is there given the negative role of dealing with disorder, rather than providing a positive basis of a relationship with God.
7 Their dual concern with avoiding conflict over words, yet finding suitable words, is of course prominent in the pastoral epistles: e.g. 1 Tim. 6:4; 2 Tim. 2:14; 2 Tim. 1:13.