

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY, INTOLERANCE, FREEDOM, EQUIVALENCE, UNIQUENESS AND TOLERANCE

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The six concepts in my title have turned up frequently in many of the papers and discussions thus far during our conference. But what exactly is meant with these concepts? How are they related? The way we define these six concepts will also determine how we view Christian (higher) education – especially in this part of the world (Asia-Oceania) where Christians are in the minority.

Personally I do not have knowledge of a situation such as most of you experience. In my country South Africa, Christians are in the majority, comprising about 75% of the population. I am of the opinion, however, that we as Christians should not only emphasize good relationships with people of other religions but that we need principal clarity about the six basic concepts to guide our relationships. (Truth, according to the Bible, does not only mean that one has to act correctly, but also think correctly)

1. Religious diversity

In spite of the fact that during the previous century secularist thinkers in the West predicted that religions will decline and finally disappear, today age-old religions are experiencing revivals and brand new ones are appearing. It was reported recently in a survey that one European city alone (Hamburg) counted eighty different religions!

The following list gives you an impression of the great variety of religions that exist:

- (1) Primal religions (like the Traditional Religions in various parts of the world);
- (2) World religions like Christianity (with all its subdivisions and denominations), Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Confucianism, etc.;
- (3) Eastern religions (like Hare Krishna) adopted in the West;
- (4) New Age Movements; Neo-paganistic religions (like the Celtic and Germanic religions);
- (5) Implicit religious movements;
- (6) Vague superstitions and many cults.

This list should also include the growing religion of secularism. In spite of the fact that it does not believe in God, it is a religion which competes with others.

Because of globalization, what were previously regarded as foreign religions have today become **neighbouring** religions. In many cases, closer contact also heightens the possibility for conflict between the adherents of the religions. Such conflict could be prevented or minimized if one would distinguish clearly the following three types of diversity.

Religious (or directional) diversity. In spite of all the different religions, only two directions can be distinguished: obedience towards the true God or obedience towards a substitute god or idol.

Structural (or associational) diversity is the diversity of different social structures or societal relationships, like marriage, family life, the school, church (temple, mosque, synagogue), business or state, etc.

Cultural (or contextual) diversity is the diversity of different cultures, like Western, African, Eastern (Japanese, Indonesian, Nepalese, Indian), and many more.

Because these three kinds of diversity are often confused (one's religious identity, for example, can be confused with one's cultural identity), they should be clearly distinguished. But they can never be completely separated, because they are inextricably related. Structural diversity is an expression of deep-seated religious and cultural diversity (The way we structure society is not done in a neutral way.) Cultural diversity, again, is a reflection of religious and structural diversity. Religion is the "soul" of a culture. And the societal structures we create are important parts of our culture. It is therefore clear that religious diversity cannot be separated from the associational and contextual.

This is exactly what Western secularism wants to do: it tries to organize the "public sphere" as if God does not exist or his ordinances do not matter. Religion, it believes, must be limited to the so-called private domain. This secularist viewpoint clashes directly with basic biblical teaching that the Christian faith - as most other faiths - must be expressed in everything we do, including education.

As Christians we can accept structural and cultural diversity, but we can never accept religious diversity as normative. We can only do so if we believe that all religions are true

(see below). Because religious unity only existed before the fall into sin and will only be realized again at Christ's return, in this dispensation *we* have no other option than to tolerate religious diversity (see below).

2. Lack of religious freedom, intolerance and violence

Because religion is of such basic and ultimate importance, it is difficult to tolerate on a personal level people of other faiths who contradict one's deepest and sincerest convictions. Intolerance occurs in all religions - Christianity included.

The reason for intolerance on a structural level, however, is usually that a clear distinction is not made between religion and politics (the state). Directional and associational diversity (cf. above) is not distinguished when a religion misuses political power to advance its own beliefs or, vice versa, when a government misuses religion for political advantage. Such a state of affairs is not to the advantage of either religion or politics. In the case of religion the results are compulsion, superficial religious commitment and deformation.

Religious intolerance often leads to violence. Many examples of "holy" wars throughout the world - not only in the past, but also today - can be enumerated.

The violent clashes between Muslims and Christians may be cited as a present-day example of a clash between religions. What could the reasons be? According to some researchers the causes could be the differences between the two religions. Muslims, for instance, reject the Christian acceptance of Western secularism (religion confined to the "private" realm), because Muslims want to live their faith holistically. Other writers draw attention to the fact that Muslims and Christians clash because of their similarity. Both religions are holistic, exclusive (they brook no rivals), and monotheistic with a strong zeal to evangelizing non-believers.

Because of persistent and religious violence through the ages some writers have even asked the question whether religion as such is violent by nature. Do people do bad things as a result of their religion?

The answer to this question has to be "no." Most religions exist because of the fact that people do bad things; religion is an important means to fight against what is wrong. A careful study of religions reveals that to most of them love is a central norm. Therefore religions are not bad in themselves, but they have a positive aim.

Why then violence in the name of religion? Most of the material I have studied emphasizes

that not religious (directional) diversity but structural and cultural diversity are the main culprits. In a threatening cultural or structural (political, social or economic) situation religion can function in two ways: either as a sedative to accept the situation passively, or as justification for a “holy” war. In the latter case the holy teachings of the religion may be interpreted as the reasons for justifying violence.

3. Religious freedom

If we don't distinguish but mix religion and politics, a state (political) religion is the result - one of the main reasons for religious conflict, as indicated already.

A total separation of religion and politics will result in a secular state, which is also not the ideal, as is becoming clearer at least in the Western world.

The only solution therefore is to distinguish clearly between the **different domains** and tasks of the church/synagogue/mosque/temple on the one hand and the state (government and citizens) on the other. The church (like other religious communities) is a community of faith which has the responsibility to promote the (Christian) faith. The state is a legal societal relationship which must ensure that justice is done to all its citizens. It includes the guarantee of religious freedom.

This does not imply that the state is an all-encompassing societal relationship and therefore the owner and creator of all kinds of rights (like the right of religious freedom). The state (through its constitution and law enforcement) can only recognize, formulate, protect and promote existing or inherent rights and balance the rights of individuals and communities. We should appreciate the fact that most modern secular constitutions (e.g. a bill of rights) guarantee freedom of conscience, belief and religion. A secular constitution is a blessing especially in countries where religious groups are the minority (like the Christians in many Eastern Countries).

It is a mixed blessing, however, because religious freedom as a constitutionally guaranteed human right is not the final solution. In many countries (some of them represented at this conference) religious freedom is accepted in theory but denied in practice. (The Hindu culture and religion may, for instance, still be promoted by a government.)

In many Western countries the crux lies in how religious freedom is interpreted e.g. by the courts. In the United States, for instance, not freedom of religion (the positive) but freedom **from** religion (the negative) is becoming the rule. In other words, the state and its courts are no longer **neutral** towards all religions (the original intention of the constitution), but

hostile towards religions.

This is, by the way, a clear example that a secular state is not a guarantee of religious freedom - its secular religion threatens and replaces all other faiths! Therefore, to base human rights on one or other form of human autonomy (man as a law unto himself) is a very insecure foundation for religious freedom. The only solid foundation is God's central commandment of love towards our fellow human beings. Human rights, in my opinion is therefore a good **beginning**, but not **sufficient** for a free and just society.

An example (from my own country) of state discrimination is that my government— in spite of its very modern secular constitution— discriminates against religiously oriented schools (Christian schools included) in that it gives them only 30% state subsidy.

In my mind the only way to eradicate any discrimination is for the state to acknowledge that religious or confessional plurality may also be expressed structurally (cf. the three kinds of diversity mentioned under point 1 above). Religiously oriented schools, organizations and pressure groups have to be accepted as something normal and beneficial for societal life. (Note: this should apply to every religion.)

4. Religious Equivalence

Often the state/government argues that the juridical equality of religions (the right of every citizen to religious freedom) implies the **principal** equivalence of all religions. An example, again from my own country, is the fact that government (the Department of Education) recently introduced a compulsory subject in all schools, called Religious Studies, in which all religions are not only treated equal juridically but made equivalent principally.

Many viewpoints exist about the truth of religions: (1) only one religion is true (the most common viewpoint amongst the adherents of the different religions); (2) no religion is true (the atheists); (3) some religions are truer than others (semi-relativists); and (4) all religions are true (radical relativists).

The last viewpoint is most common today, but it has a long history. It originated as a philosophical viewpoint (already during the Renaissance) which taught that every aspect of culture - including religion - is historically determined. In other words, it can only be true for a particular group, time or place. For example, Christianity was true for the Europeans in the past, but not necessarily at present.

My viewpoint is that we cannot determine the truth in a historical way. To argue like that implies the overemphasis of one aspect of reality, the historical-temporal. We have to

distinguish between (1) God's **revelation**, which cannot be proved true or false (not by any science, including the science of history) and (2) **religion**, as a fallible **human response** to God's revelation. In the same way we have to distinguish between God's will (as expressed in his ordinances/laws) as supratemporal and (2) our fallible human understanding or formulation of his will in the form of principles or norms.

In summary, we should reject both relativism, because we are always responding to God's will, and absolutism, because our human response to His will can always be fallible.

The consequences of present day relativism are, however, real. If all religions are true or equivalent, there is no need to try to convince someone else of your own faith. But even worse: evangelization comes to be regarded as something arrogant, fanatic, sectarian and intolerant.

Such a viewpoint is unacceptable to a Christian. Apart from the fact that all religions are not true (see reasons below), the following should be kept in mind: (1) preaching the Gospel is not something voluntary but an imperative in the Bible; (2) it should not be done in pride but in humility and with respect for others; (3) people of other beliefs should never be manipulated or forced but implored; (4) the correct kind of Christian evangelism is not driven by something negative (for example, threats of hell) but by the positive, i.e. the love of God. I think these guidelines should also be applied in the case of Christian education.

I am, therefore, in favour of serious dialogue between people of different religions. (If one believes that all religions are equally true, dialogue is not important or necessary) The purpose of such a dialogue is, however, not in the first place to convert others or to finally abandon your own beliefs, but to be enriched and strengthened in your own faith. To achieve this aim it should be a real dialogue and not a disguised monologue.

To summarize why I believe that all religions are not true or equivalent: (1) In the first place, if one believes that they are basically all the same - only different routes to the same mountain top or different pain killers for the same headache - then no critique of any religion is possible. Criticism will immediately be regarded as intolerance, fanaticism etc. (2) Secondly, relativism itself is also a viewpoint (i.e., that all religions are equivalent) and therefore often dogmatic and intolerant. (Cf. the example above of the relativistic secularism in the US which propagates freedom from all religions and is therefore not neutral but **hostile** towards every religion except its own.) (3) Thirdly, relativism does not offer a practical solution to religious pluralism and conflict at all. People (including the relativists themselves!) still believe that only their own faith is the truth. (4) Lastly, it is also

clear from the perspective of God's threefold revelation why all religions are not equivalent. Non-Christians know only God's creational revelation. Christians are privileged because, in addition, they have God's inscripturated revelation (the Bible), in the light of which they can understand God's revelation in creation even better. They furthermore enjoy the exceptional privilege of belief in God's incarnated revelation in the Saviour, Jesus Christ, and his Holy Spirit.

5. Religious Uniqueness

To say that the Christian religion is unique does not say much; every religion is unique in its own way. The question we want to answer is rather: What is special about the Christian faith? Why is it the only saving faith? In a way we have already answered this question: Christianity is not only based on God's creational revelation (his so-called general revelation), but also on his revelation in the Scriptures. This is important in spite of the fact (see above) that we should never identify the Christian religion with God's revelation - religion is something human and is by no means immune to sin.

Let us approach the uniqueness of our Christian faith from another angle emphasized in God's Word. All non-Christian religions are autosoteriological in nature. They try to attain self-salvation by inter alia: observance of the law, mystical experience, the power of magic, wisdom (or knowledge) and many more. Against all these efforts the Christian religion is unique, because it is the only really theosoteriological religion, rejecting all the ways of self-salvation. We do not have to move "up" to God. He comes "down" to us (in his incarnated revelation in Christ) to redeem us. The essence of Christianity (in my mind, at least) is that we are saved through God's grace alone (*sola gratia*). I was reminded of this again during the conference when I asked a conferee from a Buddhist country why he rejected Buddhism to become a Christian. Without hesitation and extended theological argumentation he gave a straightforward answer: "Because according to the Christian faith I do not have to earn salvation. It is impossible to deserve redemption. We simply have to accept God's grace in faith." Christianity's uniqueness is also evident in the fact that Christ is not simply a prophet (similar to those in other religions) but also a priest, who in addition offered himself. Therefore there is no other Name through which we can be saved.

I am aware of the fact that today various viewpoints are held by theologians about the role of Christ in our redemption. I will not discuss them here, because I firmly believe - and I hope you do also - that Christ is the only source of our salvation. (I do not agree with the viewpoint that no salvation is possible outside the church.)

However, I don't think it is appropriate to call Christianity "exclusive" or "absolute." By

their nature all religions are, to a greater or lesser degree, exclusive. Even those which welcome different religious viewpoints are exclusive of religions which do not accept such a relative viewpoint.

To me only God and his Word can be called absolute. As something human and full of sin, even the Christian religion cannot be absolute.

The absolutist usually stress only the differences between the Christian faith and other religions, while the relativists one-sidedly emphasize their similarities. A more balanced viewpoint would be to acknowledge both differences and similarities.

God's creational revelation (in nature and culture) is personally directed to every human being. We can therefore expect moments of truth in all kinds of religions. All non-Christian religions are not simply "pagan idolatry" to be rejected. Apart from such "black" areas (clear idolatry), there are also "grey" areas. (With more time at my disposal I could mention examples of prayers uttered by non-Christians to God, which reveal remarkable similarity to the prayers of Christians.)

But can we not call Christianity the best of all religions? Even here we have to be careful. Christianity is the best if it sincerely and correctly believes in the triune God and also practices what it believes. But it is clearly not the best if its Christians are full of pride, live an unconverted life, exploit and suppress others, etc. In such a case Christians — this is my personal experience — could learn from atheistic Marxists about, for instance, what political justice entails.

6. Religious tolerance

I have already stated that tolerance is the only solution for the tensions, conflict and even violence in our present multi-religious world, because religious unity will only be possible on a new earth.

When I presented this paper at the conference in Chennai, I proposed the following brief definition of tolerance: "The degree to which we accept things of which we disapprove." Note "the degree to which," because I don't think we should tolerate just anything, that *everything* should be accepted as religion and consequently enjoy religious freedom and tolerance. What would we then do with human sacrifices (still practised in Traditional African Religion in my country), the caste system (in this country) and the mass suicides by different cults (in the USA, Switzerland and Japan)?

Because my definition of tolerance is somewhat contradictory (“accept things of which we disapprove”) a few suggestions were made during the discussion of my paper to change the word “accept” to “recognise” or even to “appreciate.” I think the idea was to make sure that tolerance is not something passive or negative but active and positive. I am still not sure whether these suggestions (especially “to appreciate”) are real improvements of my definition, which intended to emphasize how difficult it really is to practice tolerance. Perhaps we should distinguish between different levels of tolerance. Some aspects of other faiths can be appreciated, others definitely not — the latter simply have to be accepted in spite of the fact that we totally disagree.

It is, by the way, also important to distinguish between different types of tolerance. Apart from (1) religious tolerance there is also (2) cultural tolerance and (3) structural tolerance (cf. again point 1 above). This last type includes tolerance in marriage, family, labour, politics, etc. If one confuses these types, then one can easily say, for instance, that because someone does not agree with you politically he/she is religiously intolerant or vice versa.

With the help of our preliminary definition of tolerance, it becomes possible to identify various misconceptions conceptions about tolerance. Tolerance is not the same as (1) spiritual poverty or the lack of our own convictions; (2) boundless religious openness; (3) indifference; (4) aloofness or pride; or (5) hypocrisy. It is also not (6) the popular contemporary idea of politeness, civility, courtesy, decency, non-defensiveness, “political” correctness, moderation, refinement or good manners (a shift from “to tolerate others” to “being tolerable to others”).

Our definition of tolerance plays an important role: one **disapproves** of another viewpoint because one believes in a different truth. When one simply believes that all religions are equal, then tolerance is not necessary. In that case, other religions do not present a challenge, but only another viewpoint.

When we study the relationship between tolerance and truth the following historical development becomes clear:

- (1) During the Middle Ages and the time of the Reformation (cf. the Inquisition, the Crusades, the burning of heretics and the religious wars between Catholics and Protestants), no clear distinction was made between Christianity (the truth) and God’s revelation (the Truth with a capital 1). The two were perceived as more or less identical. Consequently Christianity was absolutized. Little or no tolerance was displayed towards people who disagreed with the (absolutized) Christian Truth (with a capital 1).

- (2) During the 17th century, however, tolerance was accepted because people realized that force and violence (truth without tolerance) were not solutions. They believed that it is the Truth and power of God's revelation and his Spirit that will change people's lives. They firmly believed in salvation through Christ alone.
- (3) This exclusivist faith, however, was replaced soon afterwards by the doubt of rationalism. Because no one can really know which religion is true, an inclusivist viewpoint was accepted.
- (4) Subsequent irrationalism replaced inclusivism with pluralism, because it was believed that all religions are equally true.
- (5) Finally we experience today a shift from **pluralism** to **intolerance**. The simple reason is that nobody can consistently think in relativistic terms. The viewpoint that all religions are equivalent is not something neutral; rather it is in itself a religious belief. Therefore those who believe it are intolerant against those who do not accept it, but still believe in the truth of their own religion.

In summary, we can distinguish at least three viewpoints about the relationship between tolerance and truth: (1) **truth without** tolerance (the Middle Ages, and the following period of religious wars); (2) **tolerance without truth** (rationalistic inclusivism and irrationalistic pluralism — the first is a mild kind of relativism, while the second is a more radical relativism), and (3) **tolerance based on truth** (the original idea about tolerance which finally ended the religious wars in Europe). This last viewpoint is the correct one, based on the Bible, because it teaches both tolerance and conviction of the truth.

When we study the Bible we discover the following about tolerance. First, we learn that God himself is patient, kind, and tolerant. He gives rain and sunshine even to those who do not believe in him. Secondly, God's Word expects the same from us as believers. Therefore the deepest ground of our tolerance is not our obligation to God but his own amazing tolerance. Thirdly, because it is much easier to be intolerant, we have to rely on the power of his Spirit to be tolerant.

At the same time the Bible is clear that tolerance and conviction cannot be separated. (Compare, for instance, Elijah's struggle against the worshippers of Baal and Paul on the Areopagus.) Christians can speak with an authority based not on their own cleverness, but on the truth of the Gospel. Again and again we find examples in the Bible of loving tolerance towards others combined with holy intolerance towards sin.

Because we are confronted with so many wrong ideas about the nature of tolerance, let me close with seven statements which clarify, on the one hand, what tolerance *should not* mean

for a Christian (the negative) and, on the other hand, what it *should be* (the positive):

- (1) Tolerance can never be loveless and proud, claiming arrogantly that we “have” the Truth. The Truth calls on Christians to love and in love to witness to that Truth. This should be done in humility since we as Christians do not *possess* the Truth, but *received* it in grace.
- (2) Tolerance should not mean indifference or aloofness, but involvement in the lives and thoughts of those who do not know or have not accepted the Truth.
- (3) Tolerance should not originate in opportunism which tolerates people of other religions merely for the sake of peace or to be able to evangelize them. Christian tolerance implies that we are sincerely interested in these people and are eager to know through dialogue as much as possible about them and their religious convictions.
- (4) It is not true that intolerance is something active, while tolerance is passive in nature. Real Christian tolerance is an active deed of involvement in other people’s struggle for the truth.
- (5) Real tolerance does not originate in doubt, relativism or uncertainty but from a deep conviction of the Truth of God’s revelation.
- (6) Intolerance and fanaticism are signs of weakness. Real tolerance is not weak and sentimental. One has to be strong to endure things of which one does not approve.
- (7) Finally, Christian tolerance is not negative. The prevailing (secular) kind of tolerance without truth can only say that one should **not** be uncivil, discourteous, impolite, tactless, unpleasant or opposing. Christian tolerance however, originates in a positive attitude to life; its purpose is a peaceful and just society

Note : Please see what is meant by ‘Juridically’ and ‘principally’ , “inter alia”, “inscripturated”

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