



volume 1
number 1
march 1992

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Can Tolerance Become the Enemy of Christian Freedom?

Part I

by Roy Clements

**“There is only one religion in the world,
though there are a hundred versions of it.” — G. B. Shaw**

Summary

This paper examines the grounds upon which religious toleration has been defended in western society. It argues that only the Bible provides a foundation which is not potentially destructive of the very freedom which advocates of toleration cherish.

- Is multi-faith worship in Westminster Abbey an abdication of Christian faith?
- Should we try to convert the Jews?
- Do we have a right to expect state schools to teach the Bible?
- Will the next royal coronation be conducted by the Archbishop of Canterbury?

Introduction

We now live in a pluralist society as far as religion is concerned. By religious pluralism I do not mean merely the existence of a diversity of religions side by side, nor the protection of such diversity by civil legislation. By pluralism in this paper I mean the affirmation that many or even all religious opinions are equally valid. Such an affirmation may be the result of agnostic indifference. But increasingly it is a consequence of what might be termed the “wheel” theory of religion. According to an illustration which recurs in many forms today, the religions of the world may be likened to the radial spokes of a wheel which all find their common goal and focus in the same central hub –namely “God”.

Pluralism, based on this “wheel” model, is not merely a description of a sociological situation but a philosophical paradigm that claims to be able to integrate all religions. A public opinion survey on any High Street would confirm that it is rapidly becoming the dominant mindset of late twentieth century men and women in Britain.

The Story

The development of this pluralist attitude can be traced from the seventeenth century and is closely linked with the issue of religious toleration. After many years of in-fighting between different branches of the Christian church following the Reformation, Europe eventually adopted a policy of toleration. In Britain the Act of Toleration (1689) was a major landmark. Many Christians supported this move towards tolerance at that time and it is important to understand why. For so long religion had

been the tragic cause of violent conflict and authoritarian tyranny. Thinkers like Roger Williams in America and John Owen in Britain believed that such conflict and tyranny did not serve the cause of Christ. Tolerance for them was a virtue born of confidence in the ability of the Truth to vindicate itself without instruments of state coercion. It reflected too their high view of the dignity of man and of the trans-political nature of the kingdom of God.

However, this Puritan understanding of tolerance occupied only a very short window of time in western intellectual history. Even before 1700 it is possible to identify in the writings of John Locke the emergence of a secular apologetic that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries came to dominate the field. J.S. Mill's *On Liberty* develops this and gives it classic expression. An important element in this secular defence of toleration is the view that it is not possible on purely rational grounds to evaluate religions, and therefore to establish with any kind of cogent scientific objectivity which religion is true and which is false.

The case is well illustrated in a parable composed by G.E. Lessing in the mid-eighteenth century. A father has a magic ring which he must bequeath to one of his three sons. Since he loves them all equally and does not want them to accuse him of favouritism, he makes two imitation rings so that each can have one. The result is that each thinks his own ring is magic and that the others are not. They dispute the validity of their claims in the presence of Nathan the Wise, who offers the following judgement:

"Let each think his own ring true and in the meantime show forth gentleness and heartfelt tolerance."

In theory at least, this position still accepts the existence of absolute Truth as the Puritans did. But rationalist presuppositions meant that in religious matters this Truth was not verifiable. Thus one could "think" it true, but not "prove" it in a manner which conformed to the strict canons of verification which the emerging philosophy of logical positivism could accept. So religion fell into the category of private opinion rather than public consensus. And tolerance was the only reasonable attitude to adopt towards such uncertain matters, since you can't "prove" your opinion is right and your opponent can't "prove" it wrong. In the view of secular libertarian thinkers like Mill, what was supremely important was the freedom to *choose* the religion you wanted.

This defence of tolerance became incorporated in the liberal humanist tradition and it is still very much alive today. A very able twentieth century exponent of it was Karl Popper. In his work *The Open Society* he argues that belief that one has the Truth is always implicitly totalitarian. For it is a short step from the confidence which says, "I am sure ..." to the tyranny which says, "... therefore I must be obeyed". He insists that democracy can only be sustained in a society where an attitude of permanent uncertainty is fostered on all issues of ideology and world-view. The genius of the scientific approach for him is that it ignores all historicist schemes which purport to provide an all-inclusive

understanding of human existence and destiny. It contents itself instead with suggesting modest, tentative and falsifiable hypotheses. An open society must be one which rejects absolute truth claims and the *a priori* assumptions that go with them. An open society treats human existence as an on-going experiment in social engineering for which we have no infallible blueprint.

Late twentieth century society, however, has not been satisfied with this humanistic tolerance built as it is on unresolvable agnosticism. Human beings demand some kind of philosophical or religious self-understanding. Existentialism can be regarded as a protest against the inability of scientific rationalism to meet this need. The failure of the utopian dreams that fired humanistic optimism at the end of the nineteenth century has led to further disillusionment with science and technology and a general movement towards a more positive evaluation of the subjective, intuitive, right-brained side of human experience.

This has had in turn a major effect on the popular grounds for toleration. We can no longer be certain that "our ring" is the only magic one. But we do still want to believe in magic, nevertheless. So perhaps all the rings are equally magical? Or maybe the magic lies not in the rings themselves but in the believing of them to be so? Or, most fashionable of all, could it be that there is magic not just in rings but in everything? Is it just that our critical minds, dominated by linear logic and western individualism, have lost touch with the magic?

New Age is an articulation of the growing popularity of pantheistic monism. Unlike both Puritan theism and scientific rationalism, pantheistic monism denies the distinction between ultimate Truth and Error. All religions, it is claimed, are expressions of the same spiritual experience of cosmic oneness. And tolerance, on this view, is demanded of us, not because the right path is indistinguishable from the wrong ones, but because all paths are right. All religions lead to "God".

In Wilmette, near Chicago, the Bahai temple enshrines architecturally this convergent "wheel" theory of religion. Nine magnificent porticoes, each dedicated to the prophet of a different world-faith, provide access via nine radial aisles to a single central altar. Truth, then, lies not in the contradictory words these prophets spoke, but in the quintessential unity of religious experience which they all shared. Christian theologians too are running with this tide. Notably, John Hick, who in his *God and the Universe of Faiths* claims that we can no longer affirm a Christocentric universe. Christ must become just one of a number of planetary witnesses orbiting around the universal experience of "God".

Thus it is that tolerance, which began in the seventeenth century, as an expression of Christian confidence in the self-authenticating power of absolute Truth, has in the late twentieth century become an expression rather of a profound uncertainty regarding absolute Truth. Humanists deny its accessibility and New Age denies its objective existence.

This loss of a biblical basis for tolerance and its replacement by secularist and monistic alternatives has been disastrous for our culture. Indeed, in the

long term, pluralism based on such views will destroy the very freedom which tolerance was intended to defend.

The Results

Non-biblical theories of tolerance have led to a number of consequences in western culture, some of which are of concern primarily to Christians, but others ought to worry anyone who is seriously committed to the ideal of a free society.

(i) *Religious commitment is diminished*

As a result of the emergence of pluralism, religion has become a matter of personal choice. Owen Chadwick comments upon this in *The Secularisation of the European Mind*:

"From the moment European opinion decided for toleration, it decided for an eventual free-market in opinion."

Peter Berger in *The Heretical Imperative* argues that such a free market now monopolises the scene. He likens the situation to living in a supermarket of world-views. Just as we can choose from a range of painkillers for a headache all of which are to be found on the same supermarket shelf, so we can today choose from a vast variety of different understandings of human existence. Berger points out that the word "heresy" originally derives from the Greek verb *haireo* meaning "I choose". A heretic is literally a person who chooses what he wants to believe. And in this sense, claims Berger, all modern people are forced to be heretics by the pluralistic supermarket in which we now live.

There is undoubtedly something attractive and positive about such a situation. Societies in which religion is inculcated by social pressure or indoctrination are certainly repressive. A religion that is personally chosen ought to mean far more to the individual concerned than one in which they are merely brought up. But ironically it does not necessarily work like that. For the fact that society permits a choice in the matter of religion may easily be understood to imply that the choice is not critically significant. After all, if it really mattered what religion one adopted, society would certainly wish to influence our choice.

To return to the analogy of the painkillers on the supermarket shelf, it is no surprise if the consumer, faced with such a dazzling range of products, takes the weary view that "they are all just aspirin under different labels" and hence "they are all as good as one another". You can be sure if there was any serious health risk attached to taking any of the brands on offer, the offending tablets would be banned. What begins as "tolerance" then easily degenerates into lazy indifference. Pluralism tends to sap commitment to all creeds but its own, be that humanistic agnosticism or New Age monism. And within the Christian community the church loses its incentive to evangelise, debate about serious issues is trivialised, and an open invitation is offered to Laodicean half-heartedness and to conquest by less pusillanimous belief systems.

(ii) *Religions of revelation are disadvantaged*

On the other hand, where religious commitment does survive, it is likely to be commitment to some variety of pantheistic mysticism. G.K. Chesterton commented that once people stop believing in the Truth they don't believe in nothing; they believe in anything. His insight is well illustrated by the impact of monistic pluralism upon religious consciousness today. People in the 1990s have indeed given up on the "Truth" in the sense of an absolute cognitive framework for understanding the world. But the result has not been scepticism, as secular humanism hoped and expected, but rather pandemic religious gullibility. Deprived of any critical basis for evaluating religious claims, the smorgasbord of paganism, occultism and theosophy which has become collectively known as New Age is the natural outcome. Significantly, for New Age it is not what you believe that matters, but the personal enrichment you discover through following it. So believe anything and everything! If it makes you feel good about yourself, develops your spiritual awareness, deepens your self-fulfilment, then it is "true" for you.

In such an atmosphere religions of revelation, such as those in the Judeo-Christian tradition and Islam, lack the plausibility that would lead to a serious consideration of their truth-claims. Eastern religions steal the limelight, for they can accommodate just about any creed provided it makes no exclusive claims for itself. Such religions sit loose on doctrine since it is spiritual experience that counts. How that experience is rationalised and interpreted is of little consequence compared with the discovery of the experience itself. Indeed, doctrine on this view is just a human intellectual construct which as often as not interferes with the development of spirituality by encouraging an excessively cerebral attitude.

It is all too easy for Christianity itself to be subverted too by such attitudes, so that a new gnosticism emerges. The Christ of faith and experience is detached from the Jesus of history and biblical witness. Subjective encounter with the Spirit displaces thoughtful attention to the Word, rather than complementing it.

(iii) *Religious tolerance is ultimately undermined*

This is of course a thoroughly ironic consequence of pluralism, since it was the longing for toleration that provided its original impetus. But there is no question that both humanistic agnosticism and New Age monism are inherently inimical to the toleration of religions like Christianity.

That this intolerance has not yet been widely apparent is partly due to the immense social influence which the church has continued to wield until recently, and partly to the confidence which secular humanism has had in the inevitability of its own victory. Humanist intellectuals have in the past century tended to adopt a rather patronising attitude towards religions, seeing them generally as innocuous superstitions which would eventually wither away under the impact of science and education. But now that it is becoming clear that the

religious consciousness of the human race is not to be so easily dismissed it is harder to take the attitude that "it can't do any serious harm".

Furthermore, those who adopt a monistic basis for tolerance are likely to be even more reluctant to give theistic religions space. Those who adopt the "wheel" theory of religion see themselves not as committed representatives of one of the multitude of radial paths which lead to "God". Rather they are the possessors of a superior birds-eye perspective on all religions. As we said at the outset, pluralism of this sort is not just an example of democratic pragmatism in a multi-faith society. Far from being humble about its claims, monistic pluralism is in its own way as absolutist as the most extreme forms of fundamentalism. It is itself a religion, and a promethean one at that, since it arrogantly reduces all other religions to a sub-species of itself.

For this reason, pluralism does not in fact prevent religious persecution. On the contrary it can actually foster it. The Roman Empire was a pluralistic society that tolerated any number of private "superstitiones". But it hounded Christianity precisely because the Christians were not prepared to add Christ to its pantheon. His lordship was an exclusive one.

In this respect Lesslie Newbigin has drawn attention to telling words of William Gladstone:

"Rome, the mistress of state-craft, and beyond all other nations in the political employment of religion, added without stint or scruple to her list of gods and goddesses, and consolidated her military empire by the skilful medley of all the religions of the world. Thus it continued while the worship of the Deity was but a conjecture or a contrivance; but when the rising Sun of Righteousness had given reality to the subjective forms of faith, and had made actual and solid truth the common inheritance of all men, then the religion of Christ became, unlike other new creeds, an object of jealousy and of cruel persecution, because it would not consent to

become a partner in this heterogeneous device, and planted itself upon truth and not in the quicksand of opinion . . . Should the Christian faith ever become but one among many co-equal pensioners of a government, it will be proof that subjective religion has again lost its God-given hold upon objective reality; or when, under the thin shelter of its name, a multitude of discordant schemes shall have been put upon a footing of essential parity, and shall together receive the bounty of the legislature, this will prove that we once more in a transition state - that we are travelling back again from the region to which Gospel brought us to that in which it found us."

The warning is plain. If the pursuit of tolerance in a society results in the general erosion of public confidence in absolute Truth, then pluralism will not generate a neutral secular society at all, but an anti-Christian neo-pagan one.

Already we are beginning to observe disturbing evidence that Christians (and possibly other monotheists like Muslims and Jews) may become targets of discrimination once again and for the same fundamental reason. Pluralism will only tolerate pluralists. It can be mercilessly intolerant towards those who refuse to subscribe to its agnostic or universalist creed.

If there is no consensus on Truth a moral and spiritual vacuum is inevitably produced, which the state may well feel compelled to fill in order to prevent the proliferation of opinions which are deemed to be socially divisive or potentially anarchistic. Only a strong conviction about the existence of Truth and its public accessibility can obviate the need for such interference and encourage voluntary self-restraint on the part of those wielding power.

For this reason it is imperative that Christians articulate again the distinctive biblical grounds for tolerance. Part II of this Paper (to be published in the September issue) will attempt to do this.

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