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Can Tolerance Become the Enemy of Christian Freedom?

Part II

by Roy Clements

Résumé of Part I

Part I of this paper argued that the grounds upon which religious toleration has been defended in Western society is inadequate. Two such grounds were identified:

- (i) it is not possible to know which path to God, if any, is the correct one, so every individual must be free to select the path of their preference;
- (ii) all religious paths lead to God, so it does not matter which path the individual selects for their spiritual journey.

Argument (i) is characteristic of the liberal/humanist tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Argument (ii) has come increasingly into vogue during the twentieth century as agnosticism and atheism have yielded to pantheism and mysticism in the popular mind.

Whichever of these defences is employed, however, the long term consequences are likely to be destructive of the very freedom which advocates of toleration cherish.

Summary of Part II

This second part examines the impact of secular pluralism upon Christian theology. In particular the paper identifies the growth of an anti-rationalist defence of inter-faith dialogue. It argues for an alternative basis for religious tolerance grounded on biblical presuppositions and teaching. This biblical model is confrontational towards other faiths in that it insists upon the exclusive nature of Christian truth. Yet it is also fundamentally irenic in its attitude to other faiths, because of the nature of Christian morality and of the Christian gospel.

From exclusivism to inclusivism

"When I mention religion, I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion, but the Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion but the Church of England."

Henry Fielding's satire on the religious chauvinism of The Reverend Roger Thwackum in his classic novel *Tom Jones* is scarcely needed today. The church of the late twentieth century is bending over backwards to disavow any claims it may have made in the past to superiority over its ideological rivals. Inter-faith dialogue has featured prominently in the discussions of the ecumenical movement, and multi-faith worship is increasingly accepted among mainstream Christian denominations.

The theological rationale for this has followed closely the development of secular arguments for religious toleration in general. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries many features of the traditional Christian message became an embarrassment to scholars who had taken on board humanistic philosophical assumptions. Truth in religious matters could not be proven by logic or experiment. Religion, therefore, was to be regarded as solely based upon subjective experience rather than verifiable facts. As such, it was inappropriate to absolutise Christian doctrine in a way that cast doubt upon the

credentials of other faiths. The supernaturalist language which orthodoxy used to describe the person and work of Christ, for instance, was better regarded as mythological rather than literal. According to the reinterpreted gospel of theological liberalism, Jesus was no more than a Jewish rabbi who gave moralistic insights concerning the priority of love, or perhaps a zealot with radical ideas about the imminent arrival of a politicised messianic kingdom. Either way, the Church had no grounds for elevating him above other religious heroes.

More recently, however, the "wheel" theory outlined in part I of this paper has increasingly influenced Christian debate in this area. In this view all religions are complementary paths to God, like spokes leading to the same central hub. It is not so much that the traditional doctrines of Christianity are false; rather that the doctrines of other faiths are equally true. Neither belief in miracles nor even in the incarnation are unacceptable provided these are not expressed in exclusive and unique terms. What is important is that sincere followers of other faiths should feel affirmed in their own religious traditions.

At first, theologians sought to accommodate the other spokes of the "wheel" by developing an inclusivist perspective. For instance, the Roman Catholic Karl Rahner argued that Christianity was right to affirm Christ as the only way to God, but other faiths were in fact following him already, albeit unwittingly and under different names. Thus Rahner suggests we should speak not of non-Christians but rather of *anonymous* Christians, implying that everyone is a Christian whether they realise it or not. Raymond Pannikar has similarly spoken of the "cosmic Christ" who informs all world religions. And W. Cantwell Smith has defended the idea that the mission of God's Spirit is being fulfilled through Islam and Hinduism no less than Christianity.

From inclusivism to pluralism

However, it has become clear that such universalist inclusivism does not go far enough. If one divine Spirit inspires all religions, why then are all religions not the same? How is it that they patently teach quite different things about God and salvation?

The answer of some recent authors is to call into question the very rules of logic. The principle of non-contradiction, for instance, affirms that if a simple unambiguous proposition is true, then its negation must be false. But this fundamental axiom of rational discourse cannot be sustained if the "wheel" theory is consistently applied. Inclusivism must give way to pluralism. When it comes to religion, the principle of non-contradiction no longer holds. Ultimate truth cannot be confined within such rationalistic either/or distinctions. Thus, John Robinson in one of his last books entitled *Truth is Two Eyed* argues that the quest for inter-faith dialogue requires us to abandon the "one-eyed" perspective of traditional Western thinking. Instead, a stereoscopic model of perception is demanded which integrates bipolar points of view which may be incompatible in strict logic. We may need to hold, for instance, that God is both personal *and* impersonal.

In support of this, Paul Knitter in his book *No Other Name?* affirms, "We need a new model of truth". And the symposium edited by him and John Hick, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, argues the same case. Its twelve contributors all agree that world religions share essential parity with each other and possess validity independent of one another. Attempts at theological harmonisation are unnecessary and misguided. We must live with the paradox of mutual contradiction and logical inconsistency. For what we have in religion is not a normative

revelation expressed in propositional form, but a universal human experience of spirituality which transcends rational analysis and verbal articulation. We fundamentally misrepresent the mystery of this experience when we try to tie it down in doctrinal formulae and monopolistic creeds.

The old cliché, "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere," has thus been given scholarly approval. The cognitive *content* of faith is irrelevant; it is the authenticity of our religious *feelings* that count.

From pluralism to intolerance

Congenial as such a view is to the modern mood, it is open to major objection. To begin with it places religious belief above criticism. The worshippers of Moloch who ritually incinerated their children were no doubt "sincere". So were the murderous Thugs in their passionate devotion to Kali.

What is more, there is a disguised dogmatism in the pluralist position that renders it intellectually hypocritical. For it insists that God has not or cannot reveal himself in an objective or propositional way. But is this categorical denial not regarded as an absolute truth itself?

The principal objection to religious pluralism, however, which this paper seeks to identify, is its implicit threat to liberty of conscience. Already a religious variety of political correctness is emerging as the controlling (indeed perhaps the only) doctrine in seminaries, Religious Education departments and ordination selection boards. School teachers who wish to express a personal commitment to the uniqueness of Christ may find themselves viewed as blinkered fanatics out to brainwash their pupils. An Evangelical scholar who is known to defend a Nicene view of the deity of Christ may find it hard to achieve academic promotion. Would-be ordinands who confess an ambition to convert Jews or Muslims to Christ may discover that their sense of divine vocation is not endorsed by ministerial accreditation panels.

Nor is it only orthodox Christians who find themselves marginalised and discriminated against in the current pluralist environment. Muslims and Jews, too, who refuse to abandon the absolute truth claims of their holy scriptures find themselves labelled as "militant", "fundamentalist", "socially divisive" and of course "intolerant".

A biblical alternative

Is it possible to defend an attitude of tolerance towards other faiths, and yet at the same time affirm the exclusive truth claims of Christianity? It is the thesis of this paper that it is not only possible to do so, but vital for the preservation of religious liberty in the West. The original impetus towards religious toleration in Britain and America grew out of the reflections of Puritan thinkers who were neither agnostics nor pantheists. And if Christianity is not to be dissolved into a syncretistic pot-pourri of New Age mysticism in the coming years, their distinctively biblical response to the problem of inter-religious controversy must be rediscovered.

The first thing that must be squarely faced in this connection is that the "wheel" theory of religion cannot possibly be accommodated within the biblical world-view. The logical principle of non-contradiction is everywhere assumed in the Bible. The prohibition of false-witness would be unintelligible without it.

Furthermore, the Bible repeatedly warns of the specific possibility of false-witness in the religious context. In the Old Testament, Israel was constitutionally obliged to exclude all non-Yahwist elements from the community.

The prohibition of idolatry was enshrined in the first commandment and implacably enforced by the prophets. A classic confrontation is that of Elijah and the worshippers of Baal (1 Kings 18). It is clear that under the influence of Jezebel, a pagan princess, King Ahab had been permitting an increasingly pluralistic attitude towards religion within his realm. So much so that the general population was becoming thoroughly confused, worshipping Yahweh and Baal alternately. As Elijah himself put it, they "limped between two opinions". The prophetic response was to insist upon a choice. Elijah refuses to accept the "wheel" paradigm by which Yahwism and Baalism would be regarded as complementary routes to the same "God". On the contrary, he treats them as disjunctive belief systems.

"If Yahweh is God follow him; if Baal is, then follow him."

There could be no syncretistic compromise between two faiths which were so mutually incompatible.

New Testament evangelism

It might be argued that such an exclusivist stance was only characteristic of the Old Testament theocracy, and that it is inappropriate in a New Testament environment. Clearly the Church is not empowered to slaughter pagan priests in the way Elijah later did in the wake of his triumph on Mount Carmel. Indeed, it was the persecution of so-called heretics which led to Christian demands for religious toleration in the seventeenth century.

But it is important to note carefully just what the difference was between the way New Testament apostles responded to religious diversity and the way Old Testament prophets did. Take Paul at Athens, for example (Acts 17). He is no more "tolerant" of pagan idolatry than Elijah was. His spirit is "provoked" by it, and in his subsequent address to the Areopagus he makes no concessions to the pluralism of the Greek pantheon. On the contrary, he insists that there is only one God, worshipped perhaps in ignorance by those outside the orbit of biblical revelation, but now commanding all to abandon their erroneous idols and turn in repentance to the one to whom he has entrusted the coming judgement of the world, namely the risen Christ.

True, Paul makes no attempt to purge Athens of idolatry with the sword. He would undoubtedly have responded to such a suggestion with horror. But this would not have been because he was inclined in any way whatsoever towards our contemporary theories of tolerance. On the contrary, it was his avowed ambition to "demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God" and "to take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10).

Paul was absolutely convinced about the exclusive truth-claim of his gospel and had no hesitation or embarrassment in dismissing rival opinion as lies (Galatians 1:9). Though he sometimes makes use of a diatribe style of address (e.g. in his letter to the Romans), and the verb *dialegomai* is used in Acts many times of his debating with pagans and Jews, a careful study makes it quite clear that "dialogue" for Paul was a device aimed at persuasion, not a Socratic "dialectical" quest for an as yet undiscovered truth. In fact, the characteristic word of New Testament evangelism is not *dialegomai* but *kerusso* – to proclaim. As Michael Green has rightly put it in his *Evangelism in the Early Church*:

"The early preachers did not enter into dialogue with the world, except to understand it and to present their life-changing message in terms

comprehensible to their contemporaries. They believed they had got good news for their friends, and they knew that good news was embodied in Jesus Christ. Him they *proclaimed* [*Italics mine*]."

Tolerance with conviction

On what grounds, then, can Christians share the New Testament's confidence in the non-negotiable nature of the apostolic Gospel, and yet practise tolerance towards other contradictory faiths? There are at least two such grounds which the New Testament affirms:

(i) *The nature of Christian morality*

The self-determination of every human being must be respected because God respects it. As responsible agents, created in the divine image with intrinsic moral freedom, people may refuse the Gospel. And if they do, the Bible does not permit Christians to circumvent that refusal by strategies of intimidation or manipulation. Thus Jesus commands his disciples to do no more than shake the sand off their feet in protest against unbelieving communities. To pray for the fire of judgement to fall in retribution is to fail completely to understand the purpose of the Church's mission (Luke 9). Similarly, Paul affirms as a matter of principle that he never conducted his evangelism by any method except candid proclamation:

"By setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Corinthians 4:2)

Christianity therefore has a moral commitment which in and of itself prohibits techniques of proselytisation which are intolerant. The opposition may be silenced by courageous argument and testimony (Acts 4:14) and admonished by public protest (Acts 18:6). But the human dignity of the unbeliever must never be held in contempt.

(ii) *The nature of the Kingdom of God*

It was the folly of the crusades, the inquisition, the conquistadors and the persecutors of the anabaptists to think that coercion could serve the Gospel. In fact the Kingdom of God cannot be advanced by such violent means. Paul insists, "the weapons of our warfare are not the weapons of the world" (2 Corinthians 10:4). If Jesus' Kingdom were a secular political realm, then maybe it would be appropriate for his disciples to wield the sword in its defence. But as he himself told Pilate, "my Kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36).

We follow a Master who did not repay evil for evil, but who by precept and example taught us to love our enemies. The Kingdom of God is advanced by such self-sacrificial love. The paradox of the cross is that Christianity is spiritually strongest when it is humanly weakest. Crucified truth oppresses no-one; it is addressed to men and women in their freedom. The voluntarism of faith and love which is its desired response is rendered impossible whenever it fails to defend that freedom.

A recovery of nerve

Our response, then, to the current atmosphere of religious pluralism must be neither one of abject capitulation nor of embattled defensiveness. In the late seventeenth century, Puritan thinkers like John Owen took the lead in articulating

a politics of toleration predicated upon conviction. It was precisely because God's Truth was true that it could be relied upon to vindicate itself in the rough and tumble of intellectual debate. The church today desperately needs a recovery of such theological nerve. The great peril is that under the subtle pressure of the *zeitgeist* we may present Christianity as subjective experience rather than cognitive revelation.

Authentic Christianity welcomes dialogue with those who disagree with it. It can be tolerant without being mealy-mouthed about its faith. Ideas and reasoned argument matter to us because we believe religious truth obeys the same rules of logic as all other truth. It can be expressed in propositions. It can be contradicted. This is not of course to deny that in an ultimate sense the Truth to which the Christian witnesses is a person rather than a creed. But he is a person about whom we may speak truly or falsely. It is possible to articulate the Truth as it is in Jesus. Indeed, that is exactly what the Bible does.

Tolerance is not at all the same as indifference. The very word "tolerate" carries with it the implication of an underlying provocation which is nevertheless suppressed by the exercise of self-control. As Christians we have clear moral and theological reasons for displaying such self-control and it is vital that we set an impeccable

example in that regard. We are emphatically in favour of a free-market in ideas. But when pluralism is defended by arguments that deny the accessibility or even the very existence of ultimate truth, it becomes inimical to the Gospel. And we must not be afraid to say so.

Like Elisha of old, we need to aspire to a double portion of the Spirit of Elijah. For our culture lurches not just between two opinions, but many. Like Elijah, we shall find ourselves unpopular if we insist that our choice between them is not only free but crucially significant. Yet any respite from public scorn which we win by collaboration with Ahab will be short-lived. Surrender to pluralism, and at the end of the day we surrender to Baal and the tyranny that goes with him.

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Editorial from a recently discovered scroll containing the state-sponsored theological journal of ancient Samaria.

Baal and Yahweh – An Invitation to Dialogue

Baal and Yahweh represent remarkably similar insights into the religious truth for which we are all seeking. Both faiths, of course, believe in a supreme God. Indeed recent studies in the evolutionary theory of religion indicate that both may derive from common Semitic origins. Pentateuchal source criticism, for instance, reveals an early strand in Hebrew religion which used the title "Baal" for God.

It is true of course that Baal worship involves the use of images which traditional Yahwism forbids. But it should be remembered that these images are not crude primitive idols, but symbolic representations designed only to aid devotion.

There are some differences, too, in the area of ethics, particularly those related to sexuality. But these have been much exaggerated by prudish and fundamentalist reactionaries.

Scholars have shown that these ethical variations are associated with sociological and cultural factors, and form no insuperable barrier to meaningful dialogue. Indeed, more liberally minded members of modern society are realising that the informality and sensuality of Baal-worship is a much needed corrective to the over-emphasis on austerity and holiness in the cult of Yahweh.

It is time for Sidon and Israel to forget old animosities. A New Age of international cooperation and spiritual harmony is about to dawn through the enlightened policies of His Majesty King Ahab and Her Eminence Queen Jezebel. How could this new understanding between our countries be better expressed than through the mutual enrichment of our shared religious traditions?

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