Religious Diversity, Equality, Freedom and Tolerance

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Most people today have to live, if possible, peacefully in a multi-religious society. They are asking questions like the following: Are all religions equal? How should religious freedom be viewed? Is it really possible to tolerate other religions and how should it be achieved?

Questions like these are not of an abstract, academic nature. They are asked because of everyday experience.

Growing religious diversity
The interesting fact is that secularism—thinking and living as if God does not matter—did not leave us with a post-religious or areligious world.

On the one hand it would seem as if we are living in a post-religious world, but on the other hand there is a large scale resurgence of religious awareness. On the one hand there is less or no god (he has been declared dead) and on the other hand more god, or everything is god: god in nature, in oneself, in one's fellow man, in other religions—everywhere!

After Western Christianity had, in alliance with Western culture, dominated the world for centuries, it began to fall into decadence. The “mature”, non-religious European emerged onto the scene since the Enlightenment. The centres of gravity of Christendom shifted to other parts of the world, the so-called Third World. Europe’s dominant direction-giving position as model for the whole world has waned.

The process of secularisation of the West, however, only resulted in a religious vacuum for a short while. The empty space of Christendom is at present rapidly being filled by a variety of religions. Europe and the USA who used to be exporters of (the Christian) religion, are at present the importers of a variety of religions! The reason for this phenomenon is that, while Secularism is a religion, it is an “empty” religion, and this vacuum calls out to be filled by all sorts of old and new religions.

In the Western world one would be able to distinguish the following six types of religions—many of them also present in Africa:
1. World religions, in their more or less pure form, such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity.
2. Adjusted Eastern religions and cults, such as Hare Krishna, Transcendental Meditation, etc.
3. New Age movements.
4. Neo-Paganist religions which were driven out by Christianity in the past, but which are now reviving again, such as the old Celtic and Germanic paganisms and occultist cults.
5. Implicit religions, meaning that specific facets of reality (for example, success or wealth) or certain values (for example, individuality) are absolutised. They are called “implicit” because their adherents will normally deny that they are religions.
6. Vague superstitions indicate “religions” which have not been defined properly, such as, for example, people who believe that there will be life after death, but who have no certainty about what this would entail.

What Christ said in Matthew 12:43-45 has become true in the history of the West: When an evil spirit is exorcised from somebody, it seeks another abode. When the “house” that it has deserted remains empty, it will, however, return to it and bring with it seven others—worse than itself. At the end such a person is therefore worse off than before.

Western man has thought that he could live without any god, including the God of the Bible. This would seem to have been a misconception, however, The West is also no better off today than it has ever been. This
emerges clearly from the strongly pantheist trend already mentioned above. Pantheism means that everything is god/divine (or that god is all). Now that something of the large diversity in religions has been described, the subsequent issue can be addressed, viz. that of the equality of religions.

All religions are not equal

There are many statements in the Bible which indicate Christ’s uniqueness, such as, for example, his “I am” statements: “I am the truth and the way and the life” (John 14:6); “I am the true vine” (John 15:1); “I am the bread of life”; “I am the light of the world”. In Acts 4:12 we read that “Salvation is in no one else, for there is no other Name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” In 1 Timothy 2:5 it is said: “For there is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus ....”

W.A. Visser ‘t Hooft wrote a book called No other name nearly forty years ago (1963). Fifteen years ago (1986) Paul Knitter, however, put a question mark when writing a book with a similar title: No other name? The questions which will be addressed here are: (1) Is only Christianity true and all other religions false? or (2) are all religions at least partly (or wholly) true? or (3) are they all possibly untrue?

Four possible views

If we say that the Christian faith is the only true one, we have to remember that it is not other faiths which say this of Christianity, but Christians themselves—and the testimony which one gives about oneself is normally not impartial.

The simplistic view that all other religions are the work of Satan is definitely not biblical. Scripture clearly teaches that God, through his creational revelation, also talks to the pagans. On the other hand, it is also unbiblical to deny the work of Satan in non-Christian religions—Satan even works within the Christian religion.

What is really the difference between Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and traditional African religion? What is the difference between the Bible, the Quran, the Bhagavad Gita and African religious myths? Is it not so that if you were to be born in India, the chances really are that you would be a Hindu; in Egypt you would probably be a Muslim; in Sri Lanka there would be quite a probability of you being a Buddhist, and in Africa you would probably be a Christian, a Muslim or a supporter of Traditional African Religion?

Are all forms of religious worship not probably true in the sense that they travel by different routes, but in the end they reach the same destination—various routes to the same mountain peak? Are they not simply different expressions, in terms of different cultures, human types, temperaments and intellectual predilections? Do the different religious trends not represent the different experiences and perceptions of and responses to the same unlimited “transcendent, divine reality”? (The differences are then merely superficial as a result of the differences in mentality and cultural background.) Or does such a viewpoint bring us perilously close to the quicksands of relativism and even scepticism?

The third possibility: If all religions could not be true—even if everybody thought that his were true—it is of course also possible that none of them is true.

Or are we on a wrong track by trying to make the question of truth applicable to religions? We do not, after all, ask this question when it comes to cultures, and do not, for example, ask the question as to whether American culture is less true or more true than, for example, Japanese culture. We do not say, either, that Japanese culture is totally untrue.

A survey of the different viewpoints

M.S. Heim, in his book Christ the only way? (1985) divides the different viewpoints into two main groups (pluralism and particularism), which are then sub-divided into three groups each.

Pluralism

Parallel pluralism
Christ is the only mediator for Christians. Other faiths, however, can yield much the same results as Christianity. (For example, Ernst Troeltsch: The absoluteness of Christianity and the history of religions.)

**Jigsaw puzzle pluralism**

Each religion contains a fragment of the full and final truth. It is our task to link up the pieces. There is no communal core in all religions, but they should all flow together ultimately. The strong point(s) of each religion should be brought together in a mansion of faith for all nations. (E.g. John Hick: God and the universe of faith and God has many faces.)

**Gradual pluralism**

Some religions bring the final truth to stronger expression than others. The Christian faith is true in the sense that it is the best, because Christ towers above other religious leaders. He is, in a sense then, the highest peak in the mountain range! (For example, Schubert M. Agden: The reality of God.)

**Particularism**

As opposed to pluralism, the particularists teach that God works in a determining way for the whole world through the person of Christ. They therefore reject—to a greater or lesser extent—the relativism to which pluralism gives rise.

**Magnetic particularism**

This movement views Christ as a magnet which attracts all other religions and fills them with his magnetic power. Nobody is saved without Christ, but they can be saved as Muslims, Buddhists or Hindus. Salvational knowledge of God is therefore possible without the revelation of the Bible. The grace which flows from Christ orients man—even unknowingly—towards God. His power flows through all religions and turns them into instruments of salvation when their adherents respond in a believing manner. (For example, Karl Rahner: Foundations of Christian faith.)

**Healing particularism**

The image here is of a life-saving vaccine which could heal anybody—even those who have died. (It is often asked what happens to people who never had the chance to hear about Christ, or those who died very young.) This view is almost the same as the old “second-chance-theory” after death. It differs from the preceding vision (which teaches that the meaning of Christ can be channelled through other faiths) in the sense that its full effect is dependent on direct and personal knowledge of God. (For example, Karl Barth: Church Dogmatics.)

**Imperial particularism**

Christ is the only source of our salvation, and conscious confession of Christ in this life is the only way along which we can hope for salvation. (For example, Leslie Newbigin: The finality of Christ.)

Heim’s overview is of course a simplification and cannot possibly do justice to the many and growing visions on the issue of Christ’s relationship with other “saviours”. He also does not treat clearly enough the question as to what will happen to those who never heard the Name Jesus Christ. Personally, I do not think that this is a question that can be answered. Can we give a biblical answer to this when it is a question that did not interest the writers of the Bible? Shall we let it suffice that God is a just and impartial Judge and will therefore judge everyone in accordance with the light that he/she had? Might we say that for children who die young God’s love in Christ is full and completely applicable? Or are we going too far in saying even this?

**Imperialist arrogance?**
The particularists regard the pluralists as relativists, and finally as sceptics. (It is a small step from “All religions are true” to “No religion is true”). The pluralists in their turn regard the particularists as exclusivists. They are seen as arrogant, intolerant, imperialist and even fanatic.

I do not, however, regard a person who believes that his faith is the true one as necessity arrogant. He can, without relinquishing his convictions, acknowledge his own fallibility, as well as appreciate the perspectives of others. Especially if he is a Christian, he should not be arrogant at all, because he should acknowledge that the knowledge which he has of God and Christ is not the result of his own cleverness or piety, but has come about precisely because of his own weakness. It is a result of the grace of God. And if a Christian feels impelled to share his faith with others, this need not be a sign of arrogance or religious imperialism, but it can also be viewed as a sign of a humble desire that others should also share in the saving Truth.

This brings us back to the big question:

Are all religions equal?

My answer is quite simple: All religions are not equal. The reason is obvious: I believe in the Christian religion as the truth. The word “believe” is in italics, because one’s religion is one’s ultimate and total commitment to someone or something which you regard as the divine, absolute authority. It is humanly impossible to prove in a rational or any other way either that your own religion is true or that other religions are false.

Let me nevertheless, try to say a few words about this very difficult problem. I will approach it from only one perspective, viz. religion as our human reaction to God’s revelation.

That God has revealed and is still revealing himself to people of other faiths cannot be denied, because he continuously reveals himself to everyone - even the so-called irreligious person. This is usually called God’s “general” revelation. Because God daily speaks concretely, clearly and personally, I do not like the term “general”, but prefer “creational” revelation to indicate God’s voice in the ordered structure of reality. (The term “creational revelation” is not really satisfactory, because all forms of God’s revelation occur in and through creation. The Bible as book is part of creation and Christ was a human being.) Because of our sinful nature we tend to suppress this revelation of God and to replace it with our own beliefs. Religion (= our response to revelation) is therefore always a mixture of truth and falsehood. On the one hand Christianity is not immune to what is wrong, and on the other hand Christians can admire beautiful elements in non-Christian religions.

As Christians we are privileged above other religious people because we know a second form of God’s revelation, namely in a written form in the Bible. In a certain sense God “republished” his creational revelation in the Scriptures. Or to use another metaphor: He provided our weakened eyes with the glasses of Scripture to be able to read his creational revelation.

Through the Scriptures, guided by the Holy Spirit, as Christians we also know and believe in God's third revelation, his “incarnated” revelation in the Person of Jesus Christ. As a human being He lived on earth as we should do - in full obedience to God’s will. He was, however, different from all other religious leaders and prophets like Mohammed, Buddha, Confucious, etc., because He died as priest. No other religion knows about a God who loved this world so much that He sent his own Son to die and rise again to renew everything. He is, furthermore, the King of the entire universe.

To my mind the difficult question about the equality of religions can best be approached from the perspective of the norm of God’s threefold revelation and not from the subjective human religious experience. Religion (our life-encompassing response to God’s revelation) should always be guided by and obedient to God’s will as given in his threefold revelation. This emphasis is of vital importance as the opposite is often the case: our religious aspirations and needs determine the contents of what we believe to be “revelation”. Such a reversal of course not only applies to non-Christian religions. History bears abundant testimony to the fact how Christians did bad things in the name of their religion.

Our standard for judging whether religions are equal should therefore not be what/how the Christian religion was or is, but what it ought to be in the light of God’s revelation in creation, in Scripture and in Christ. Even though it may be difficult - even impossible? - to distinguish between divine revelation on the one hand
and the human religious response on the other, we should at least try to do so. By comparing the revelation of the God of the Bible with the revelations in which other religions believe, we will, I presume, be in a better position to see the uniqueness of the revelation which is the foundation of our Christian faith. However, as stated already above, it should be kept in mind that the fact that God’s revelation has no equal, cannot be proved rationally or scientifically in a comparison with other faiths - ultimately it can only be believed in gratitude and humility.

**Religious freedom**

The fact that I do not wish to put Christianity on a level with other religions (other religions also regard themselves as unique) does not mean that I reject freedom of religion and that I support the idea of Christian imperialism. The argument is often stated that one can only support religious freedom if one accepts the idea of the equality of all religions. It has already been stated, however, that there is a big difference between religious equality and religious freedom.

**Religious intolerance—a general phenomenon but unacceptable**

The need of religious freedom is clear from the fact that lack of religious freedom and religious intolerance have in the course of history drenched the earth in suffering and blood. Every religion has the tendency to regard its own form of worship as the only true one, or at least as the best. All too often this can lead to intolerance of other religions to the point even of persecuting their adherents.

One could mention the religious wars between Christians themselves, and the Crusades, during which Christians wanted to overpower Muslims by the power of the sword.

The obverse would also be true. Where Islam obtains the power of state the zeal for the faith at times leads to a degrading of Jews and Christians to the level of second-hand citizens and only barely tolerating their religions.

Although Hinduism reveals a striking religious tolerance, intolerance can be manifested when a Hindu converts to another religion, because in this way he/she affects the social unity of the community.

Buddhism also reveals a special willingness to listen to other convictions, but when Buddhism and nationalism are linked, a break with Buddhism is regarded as treachery against the nation.

The erstwhile intolerance of Communism—also a form of religion—towards Christianity in Eastern Europe, Russia and other places where it had become the official state ideology is well known.

From all these examples it clearly emerges that the danger of religious intolerance appears again and again when no clear distinction is made between religion and the state or politics.

Today the constitutions of most countries guarantee the freedom of religion, belief and opinion. Religious freedom can be motivated or founded in different ways, for example:

1. on the basis of religious relativism, already discussed above;
2. indifference with regard to the demand for truth;
3. even simply as the result of a need for peace among different religions.

**Biblical grounds for religious freedom**

Christians will want to know, however, whether the Bible supplies grounds for religious freedom, and what exactly these grounds are. They will be considered briefly.

*The Bible reveals that each person has been created in the image of God* (cf. Genesis 1:27; 9:6 and James 3:9), and that God imparts to each individual certain rights and responsibilities (Genesis 1:28). God leaves room for people to seek Him—and to serve Him—He even allows people and nations to go their own way (Acts 14:16). He gives to each person freedom of conscience (Romans 2). We cannot therefore discriminate against anybody on the basis of his/her religious convictions.

*The God of the Bible is a good, long-suffering God*. He lets his sun rise and set on good and evil alike; He lets his rain fall on the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45). He is also patient and long-suffering and gives people
an opportunity for conversion (John 4:2; Romans 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9 and Acts 14:17). God’s patience does not mean that He will approve of evil and inhumanity, but that He offers people the opportunity to be converted. The final judgement about what is true and what is false does not lie with man, the church or a government, but with God alone (Romans 12:19).

The most important ground or foundation for religious freedom, therefore, is not man’s tolerance but God’s tolerance or long-suffering. In the same way that God deals with man, people also have to act towards each other (cf. Luke 9:52-56).

*The Gospel is not disseminated through violence or force* but through persuasion and conviction (1 Corinthians 1:17 ff; cf. Zechariah 4:6). The battle is fought, not with weapons of the flesh, but of the Spirit (Matthew 26:52; 2 Corinthians 10:4). The Gospel comes in peace, not in force (John 18:36).

Although the church is represented as a militant church (Ephesians 6:12), and also as a persecuted church (John 15:20; 2 Timothy 3:12) and a pilgrim church (Hebrews 11:13) which has no special privileges, it is an institution which wages a spiritual struggle (Ephesians 6:12) and which does this with the weapons of the Spirit (2 Corinthians 10:4). It therefore cannot use political favouritism or even force to promote the kingdom of God.

**Questions of Christians**

Some of the questions which have been raised are the following:

*Does religious freedom not imply religious equality?*

This has already been denied. It should also be kept in mind that religious freedom is primarily a juridical concept, which indicates that the government in a religiously plural society should protect all religions and treat them equally. The right to free religious practice should be protected against possible contraventions by government.

*Does this not imply that the faithful (Christians) have to pull in the same yoke with unbelievers (2 Corinthians 6:14-18)?*

The concern in this text is with the church, and not with the state. The prohibition applies to the church, but not to the domain of the state.

It is important to remember that church and state each has its own God given terrain and task. The church is a community of believers, and the state a public juridical community. Therefore the task of the state is not to promote one or the other form of religion, but to see to it that justice is done to all citizens in the country. In this sense the state is not “neutral”—it has received a specific task from God which should be executed.

This brings us to the next question, which is:

*Does religious freedom not imply state neutrality?*

For several centuries before the Sixteenth Century Reformation Christians believed that the state should be “Christian”. This meant inter alia that the state had to promote the Christian religion actively and even had the power to punish and to persecute those who were not Christians.

The following four factors served as motivations for relinquishing this view after the Reformation. (1) It led to violence and the persecution of non-Christians, because there was no freedom of conscience or of religion. (2) The realisation dawned that human ideas and the convictions of the heart could not be changed through force of government. (3) It also became clear that large-scale degeneration and superficiality occurred when (as during the reign of Constantine and thereafter) Christianity became a state religion. (4) Christianity abused the power of the state (politics) and, obversely, Christianity could easily be used by the state for its own purposes—even to justify repression (the phenomenon of “civil religion”).

The answer to the question above is, therefore, yes, the state in the case of a multi-religious society has to be “neutral” in order to fulfil its God-given role of guaranteeing public justice.
The correct interpretation
Religious freedom does not imply an endorsement by the state of neutrality; relativism; indifferentism or tolerance of simply everything. It does not therefore imply that all values of society can simply be thrown overboard so that injustice, lies and evil can triumph.

Properly formulated religious freedom means that all members of the society, including Christians, can practise their religion unhindered, publicly and privately—provided, of course, that this is not regarded as a licence for injustice, oppression, slander or other public evils. As such it is in harmony with the Word of God.

Religious tolerance
Religious pluralism has its beneficial side. It impels one, for instance, to self-criticism; a reassessment of one’s own viewpoint on the one hand and respect for other viewpoints and tolerance of other lifestyles on the other hand. The correct kind of pluralism will not lead to relativism either. There is, however, an unhealthy pluralism.

In this new pluralistic attitude norms, values and traditions are at stake. Morality has become a purely private affair. Parents and teachers no longer know if and how they should transmit values to the younger generation. People have difficulty to stand up for their convictions. Institutions and organisations founded on a specific worldview, for example, Christian schools, colleges, universities and political parties are experiencing problems in holding to their identity. Pluralism has created a cultural and moral vacuum and even collapse as well as religious scepticism and cynicism.

Because this article may, if not read carefully, give the impression that I am against dialogue with other religions, it should be stated clearly at the beginning that this is definitely not the case. I am of the opinion that inter-religious discussions are necessary to understand each other. On the one hand, dialogue should not simply be a disguised way for the Christian to force others to accept his/her religion. On the other hand, if a Christian feels compelled to share his/her faith with others, this need not be a sign of arrogance or religious imperialism.

Reasons for religious pluralism and tolerance in Western history
By religious pluralism I do not mean merely the existence of a plurality of religions side by side and the protection of such diversity by the state (religious freedom). Religious pluralism is understood here as religious equality, e.g. that many or all religions are equally valid.

A Christian understanding
Let us start our historical review at the end of the seventeenth century. After many years of violent conflict between the different Christian churches, Europe eventually adopted a policy of toleration (for instance in Britain the Act of Toleration—1689). People realised that authoritarian tyranny could not serve the cause of Christ. Tolerance was born of confidence in the ability of the truth of the Gospel to vindicate itself without state coercion. We could call this the Christian understanding of tolerance.

The rationalistic viewpoint
Very soon, however, other secular viewpoints emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. It was argued (e.g. by J.S. Mill) that it is not possible to evaluate religions on rational grounds and decide which one is true and which ones are false. Everyone, therefore, had the freedom to choose the religion she/he wanted.

In the mid-eighteenth century, G.E. Lessing illustrated this viewpoint with the following parable. A father had a magic ring which only one of his three sons could inherit. Since he loved them all and did not want to be accused of favouritism, he made two extra imitation rings. The result was that each son thought his own ring was the magic one and the other two were not. They disputed their claims in the presence of a wise man who offered the following judgement: “Let each think his own ring is true and in the meantime show forth gentleness and tolerance”.
The parable clearly indicates that religious truth is not verifiable—in spite of the fact that, in theory at least, it still accepts the existence of an absolute truth (there is only one real magic ring). One could “think” one’s religion is true, but not prove it. Religion was henceforth limited to the private domain. Tolerance was the only reasonable attitude since one can’t prove one’s religion to be right and one’s opponent can’t prove it to be wrong. This idea of tolerance and religion being a private matter became typical of the liberal humanist tradition. Accordingly it was held that any influence of religion should be barred from the public sphere.

An irrationalistic turn

In the late twentieth century we witness a major shift: I can no longer be certain that my ring is the only magic one. Perhaps all “rings” are equally magical!

A good example of this viewpoint is the New Age Movements with their pantheistic monism which denies the distinction between truth and error. All religions are the same. Tolerance, according to this view, is demanded not because the right path is indistinguishable from the wrong ones, but because all paths are right—all religions finally lead to “God”!

To summarise: Tolerance, which began in the seventeenth century as an expression of Christian confidence in the self-evidence and self-authenticating power of the absolute truth of the Gospel, has at the end of the twentieth century become an expression of profound uncertainty, even agnosticism, regarding an absolute truth. Many deny its accessibility and many even its objective existence.

The two phases described in more detail

The developments subsequent to the viewpoint of the Puritans of the seventeenth century could also be divided as follows: (1) from exclusivism to inclusive relativism and (2) from inclusive relativism to pluralism. Viewpoint (1) only implies mild relativism, while viewpoint (2) advocates radical relativism. The tendency towards relativism already started in rationalistic philosophy, while its full development became very clear in irrationalistic thought.

The first development can be illustrated with the image that other different religions are simply different footpaths climbing a mountain—finally they reach the same mountain top. Or the image of a wheel: the religions of the world are like the radial spokes of a wheel which all find their common focus in the same central hub, viz. “God”. Another image is that today we live in a supermarket of religions and worldviews—just as we can choose from a range of painkillers for a headache. Faced with such a dazzling range of products one can easily argue: “They are all just the same under different labels—everyone is as good as the other”!

Accordingly, all religions are complementary paths to God. It is not so much that the doctrines of Christianity are false; rather the other faiths are equally true.

The second movement (from inclusive relativism to radical pluralistic relativism) is of the opinion that the universalist inclusivism did not go far enough. Ultimate truth cannot be defined in rationalistic either-or distinctions. Religion is a universal experience which transcends rational analysis. The cognitive content of faith is irrelevant; it is the authenticity of our religious feelings that is important. It does not matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere! Inclusivism has given way to relativistic pluralism.

The two grounds for religious tolerance advocated in Western history were, therefore, the following: (1) Rationalistic agnosticism (of the 18th and 19th century): it is not possible to know which path to God—if any—is the correct one; therefore every individual must be free to select his own path. (2) Irrationalistic pantheism and mysticism (of the late 20th century): all paths lead to God. Therefore it does not matter which road the individual selects for his/her spiritual journey. The final consequence of radical relativism is indifference.

The third step—our next main point—is the development from pluralism to intolerance. Not only old style mild relativism, but also new style radical relativism is basically intolerant.

From pluralism to intolerance
Contemporary religious pluralism (as described above) has the following consequences:

1. It places religious belief above any criticism. It is possible, however, that one can be very sincere (like the worshippers of Moloch who burned their own children), but still be totally wrong!

2. Pluralism is guilty of disguised dogmatism in spite of the fact that it fights against all other kinds of “dogmatism”. If, for instance, it insists that God did not reveal Himself clearly as the only true God, this categorical denial is also an absolute truth. Is this not intellectual hypocrisy?

3. The most dangerous consequence of relativistic pluralism, however, is its implicit threat to liberty of conscience or religious freedom. A religious variety of political correctness is emerging today. School teachers and Christian academics who wish to express a commitment to Christianity are viewed as fanatics who try to brainwash their pupils and students and may find it hard to achieve promotion. It becomes a sin when you feel a calling to convince people from other religions to accept the biblical faith. Not only Christians but also Muslims and Jews, who refuse to abandon the absolute truth claims of their holy scriptures, find themselves labelled as particularistic, exclusivist, fundamentalist, divisive, intolerant, imperialist and militant!

   It seems as if pluralism will eventually destroy the very freedom which its so-called tolerance was intended to defend!

   This ironic consequence cannot be denied. Humanistic agnosticism and New Age monism both are inherently inimical to religions like Christianity. The reason is that pluralism is not simply an example of democracy in a multi-faith society. It is not humble about its claims at all—it is an arrogant, absolutist religion itself.

   Modern pluralism in fact therefore does not prevent religious persecution, but it may well foster it. And this will not happen for the first time in history. The Roman Empire was a pluralistic society which tolerated all religions or “superstitions”—except Christianity, because the Christians were not prepared to add Christ—their exclusive Lord—to the Roman pantheon. Pluralism will not generate a neutral, secular society at all, but a neo-pagan and therefore anti-Christian one. Pluralists will only tolerate fellow-pluralists and will be intolerant towards those who refuse to subscribe to their “creed”.

**The biblical alternative**

If our conclusion is that secular Western thought has failed to offer solid grounds for religious tolerance, what about the Bible? We know that Christianity does not have a good track record in this regard. (cf. the previously mentioned religious persecutions in the name of Christianity in the 16th century). If, however, we listen carefully to the Bible again, is it possible for the Christian to defend an attitude of tolerance towards other faiths and at the same time to affirm the truth claims of Christianity? My answer to this question is affirmative. It is not only possible to do so, but it is also of vital importance for the preservation of religious liberty. And—what is important—it is not motivated on the basis of either religious relativism or indifference with regard to truth, or simply the practical need for peace amongst different religions.

   On what biblical grounds can the Christian on the one hand practise tolerance towards other contradictory faiths, and on the other hand have confidence in the non-negotiable nature of the Gospel? Summarised: how is tolerance with conviction possible? Let us have a brief look at each one of them.

**Tolerance**

From the Bible we receive the following guidelines:

*God respects the freedom of human beings.*

   As already mentioned, God leaves room for people to seek Him and to serve Him—He allows people and nations to go their own way. He gives to each person freedom of conscience.

   We cannot therefore discriminate against anybody on the basis of his/her religious convictions. The freedom of choice of every human being must be respected, because God respects it. As responsible beings, created in the image of God, people may refuse the Gospel. And if they do, the Word of God does not allow
Christians to circumvent that refusal by strategies of manipulation or intimidation. To pray for the fire of judgement is to fail completely to understand the purpose of the Gospel (Luke 9). Jesus commands his disciples only to shake off the sand from their feet in protest against unbelieving people. In the same way Paul never conducted his proclamation of the Gospel by any other method except candid proclamation (2 Cor. 4:2). The opposition may be silenced by courageous argument and/or testimony (Acts 4:14) and admonished by public protest (Acts 18:6), but intolerant techniques are prohibited—the human dignity of the unbeliever must never be held in contempt.

*The God of the Bible is a good, long-suffering God.*

As already mentioned, he lets his sun rise and set on good and evil alike; He lets his rain fall on the just and the unjust. He is also patient and longsuffering and gives people an opportunity to be converted. God’s patience does not mean that He will approve of any evil and inhumanity, but that He offers people the opportunity to be converted. The final judgment about what is true and what is false does not lie with man, the church or a government, but with God alone.

The most important ground or foundation for religious freedom, therefore, is not man’s tolerance but the long-suffering, patience, grace and love of God—His “tolerance”. (I am putting the word tolerance in inverted commas, because I am not quite sure whether we should use this modern word in describing God.) In the same way that God deals with man, people have to act towards each other.

*As mentioned above (in the case of religious freedom) the Gospel is not disseminated through violence or force but through persuasion and conviction.*

It was the folly of the crusades and the inquisition as well as the conquistadors and the persecutors of the Anabaptists (16th century) to think that coercion could serve the Gospel.

Tolerance (patience towards those whose opinions and practices differ from one’s own) is approved in dealing with disputes among fellow-Christians (cf. Mark 9: 38-48; Rom. 14: 1-13 and 2 Cor. 2:4-11), but it is clearly condemned in dealing with sin, evil and error (cf. 1 Cor. 5: 1-13; 2 Cor. 6: 14-18; Mark 9: 43-48 and 2 John 10,11). It should be kept in mind that the Christian cannot simply tolerate anything!

*Confidence*

The viewpoint that the different religions are equal (and therefore have to be tolerated) is problematic. The dogmatist pluralistic viewpoint about their equality simply sweeps the deeper problems under the carpet without really answering them. This becomes clear when one dares to ask a few simple critical questions like the following:

*According to what or who’s criteria should the different religions be compared?*

Are we not, also in the case of religions, permitted to make judgements and characterise them as good or bad?

How should it be determined whether something is genuine religion? Should we simply accept anything? Does this include the different cults which were, in the last few years (cf. what happened recently in Switzerland, the U.S. and Japan) responsible for religious mass murders and suicides?

The wheel theory of religion (see above) cannot in any way be accommodated to the basic teaching of the Bible. The Old Testament repeatedly warns against the possibility of false witnesses. Idolatry was prohibited.

A very clear example is the confrontation between Elijah and the worshippers of Baal (1 Kings 18). Elijah refuses the wheel theory propagated by King Ahab. Ahab had been permitting an increasing pluralistic religious attitude which confused the people of Israel to such an extent that they worshipped Yahweh and Baal alternately. Elijah, however, refused to accept that the two religions could be complementary routes to the same “God” and insisted upon a choice: “If Yahweh is God, follow him; if Baal is, then follow him”.

It is true that the New Testament church is not permitted to slaughter pagan priests like Elijah did. But this does not imply that the New Testament has a less exclusivist stance.
Take, as an example Paul at Athens (Acts 17). Is he more tolerant of pagan idolatry than Elijah was? No, his spirit is provoked and in his subsequent address on the Areopagus he makes no concessions to the pluralism of the Greek pantheon. He insists that there is only one God. This God may perhaps have been worshipped in ignorance by those not knowing biblical revelation. But now he is urging them to abandon their idols and turn in repentance towards Christ.

Paul makes no attempt to purge Athens from idolatry with the sword. But this is not done because he believed in our contemporary secular theories about tolerance. The task he sets for himself is very clear from a text like 2 Corinthians 10:4,5: “to demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God” (the negative side) and “to take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (the positive). Because he was absolutely convinced about the universal and exclusive truth of the Gospel, dialogue for Paul was aimed at persuasion. It was not a Socratic dialectical quest for a still to be discovered truth. Dialogue for him was a means to proclaim the Good News.

As Christians we cannot prove by way of logical argumentation that the Bible is God’s Word. At the same time it cannot be disproved. It has to be accepted—or rejected—in faith. Belief definitely has a rational side or facet, but it also surpasses our rational faculties (more correctly: it underlies our rationalisations).

Of course our understanding of Scripture is never perfect but limited and sometimes even incorrect. We may therefore never absolutise our personal understanding of the Scriptures. We should, furthermore, always keep in mind the radical difference between, on the one hand, our subjective understanding of Scripture (our religion) and, on the other hand, his Word and God Himself. Religion—also the Christian religion—is always a fallible, human response to God and his Word which is infallible.

It should also be added that the Bible is not the only way in which God reveals Himself. He reveals Himself in a non-lingual way in nature, culture and history (his so-called general revelation), in a lingual way in Scripture and in a personal way in Christ. This explains why other religions, like African Traditional Religion (through God’s revelation in nature and culture), knew about God long before the missionaries arrived with the Gospel. Because of sin, however, our understanding of God’s creational revelation is incomplete and distorted. We also need the Bible. (It is like spectacles assisting our affected eyesight or hearing aids which help us to hear his voice clearly again.) Non-Christians can therefore learn much from God’s creational revelation—often more than Christians—but without the Bible and Christ their knowledge cannot be complete.

Conclusion
Tolerance in the biblical sense therefore, is not the same as relativistic indifference. It is always accompanied by confidence.

Authentic Christianity is in favour of religious freedom and welcomes dialogue with those who disagree with it. This one should do with self-control, setting an impeccable example in this regard. But we should be tolerant without being mealy-mouthed about our faith. We should be aware of the peril that under the subtle pressure of the spirit of our times, we present the Gospel as mere subjective experience rather than the revelation of God. Pre-scientific religious truths are different from scientific and other truths, but basic logic cannot simply be thrown overboard. We can speak falsely or truly about the Truth, Jesus Christ.

As Christians we are emphatically in favour of a free-market of ideas. But when tolerance is defended with relativistic, pluralistic arguments which deny the accessibility or even the very existence of ultimate truth, it becomes an enemy of the Gospel—and we must not be afraid to say so. If we capitulate to contemporary secularistic pluralism we will in the end also have to surrender to the intolerant tyranny that goes with it.

References


