Can religions be tolerant?

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For most people in the Western world religious intolerance is scorned as the survival of a medieval aberration; an outmoded attitude which is totally out of place in a world that has long taken the value of tolerance for granted. But this easy disdain, the rhetoric of 5th form atheism, but now especially shrill coming from the attack dogs of the new atheism, totally fails to get the measure of the issue. We have to try to dig deeper than that.

First, a religious view of the world is held because it is believed to express the truth about life. This is a truth about what is the case. It is not a fancy, a personal whim or point of view. It is adhered to because it is believed that is the way things are. Now it may be that the seeds of religious intolerance lie here, in this very belief to have the Truth. For if this is the way things are, then you expect others to see things this way as well. If they see things differently, they must be wrong, mistaken in some way. And if religion is a life or death matter, an issue than that which there cannot be a more important, then it is no trivial matter that others are mistaken, and almost certainly leading others into error as well. That is why in talking to some people with very committed beliefs who are out to convert you to those beliefs, you can feel under pressure, uncomfortable, and anxious to move out of the conversation as quickly as possible.

Yet, although this kind of situation might arise-and it has arisen with me with both Christian evangelists and Muslim ones-it is not a civic problem. I politely sidle out of the conversation and move
on. The problem arises when there is an alliance of religious conviction and political power, when people of religious conviction have the power to put pressure on us in overt or low key ways, to conform to their view of the world.

Since the time of Locke, with his unanswerable argument that genuine religious faith must be a matter of personal conviction, and has to be freely chosen, not coerced, a distinction has been made in theory between government’s legitimate role in dealing with questions of material existence, where a degree of coercion may sometimes be necessary, and questions of belief in which coercion has absolutely no place. This has led to a distinction between the public and the private sphere, and the confinement of religion, for so many, to the personal, private and inner realm. But how can religion, which claims to offer truths of the utmost importance about life limit itself in that way? As is well known, Islam cannot see itself as so limited and confined in scope. Sharia law embraces the whole of human life, political as well as private, material as well as spiritual. But the God disclosed in the Hebrew scriptures is likewise concerned with the whole of human existence, and expresses this concern in the Jewish Torah; and Christianity grew out of this soil. The papal encyclical *Immortale Dei* of Pope Leo XIII reads rather strangely today, but it is salutary to hear the words for they remind us that we cannot draw an absolute line between historic Christianity and Islam in this respect.

It is a sin in the state not to have care of religion….or out of the many forms of religion to adopt that one which chimes in with the fancy, for we are bound absolutely to worship God in that way in which He hath shown to be His will.

According to one authoritative Catholic source a few decades ago “no state is justified in supporting error or in according error the same recognition as truth”, the truth of course being embodied in
the Catholic religion. The Roman Catholic church now puts things in a much more nuanced way, but on certain issues, which are regarded as right or wrong by Natural Law, such as abortion, they would still hold that the state has an absolute duty to reject error, however people might vote.

What we see so far then is

1. There are the seeds of intolerance implicit in any religious world view.
2. This only becomes a civic problem when a particular religion is aligned with political power.
3. A neat distinction between public and private, the political and personal, the material and the spiritual, the outward and the inward, is unacceptable at least to the three great monotheistic religions. For the God in whom they believe cares about the whole of existence.

John Stuart Mill, after pointing out the argument of great thinkers in favour of religious tolerance, wrote

Yet so natural to mankind is intolerance in whatever they really care about that religious freedom has hardly anywhere been practically realized, except where religious indifference, which dislikes to have its peace disturbed by theological quarrels, has added its weight to the scale. In the minds of almost all religious persons, even in the most tolerant countries, the duty of tolerance is admitted with tacit reserves….Wherever the sentiment of the majority is still genuine and intense, it is found to have abated little of its claim to be obeyed.¹

Before we sigh and groan that the problem seems even worse than we initially imagined it, there are two other points to note briefly.

First, although I am talking about religion what I say can apply to any world view, not just one based on a belief in the transcendent. Leaving aside Fascism, which had some pagan religious roots, the two most intolerant movements of the 20th century, were Russian and Chinese Marxism and the Chinese cultural revolution. The numbers killed then in the desire to achieve conformity were far greater than those in any religious persecutions of the same century.

Secondly, is our much prized tolerance in the West really tolerance? Tolerance, said G.K.Chesterton, is the virtue of those who do not believe anything. Then there are the probing lines of W.B.Yeats in his poem “The Second Coming”

The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity

A character in one of Graham Greene’s novels says

The church condemns violence, but it condemns indifference more harshly. Violence can be the expression of love, indifference never.2

These quotations bear out what Mill said, namely that one major factor bringing about tolerance has been the decline in intensity of belief. It poses very sharply the question as to whether there can be a form of tolerance that is not simply the expression of indifference and unbelief? Whether there can be a more deeply grounded tolerance one that can combine with passionate intensity in belief, profound conviction and love? It is in facing this question that we begin to grapple with the real issues.

I suggested that there are three strands to this question: the seeds of intolerance implicit in any claim to universal truth, the alliance of such claims with political power, and the concern of religious truth, in the form of the Abraham faiths, for human existence in all its aspects. It is the second of these which is most crucial of all, the alliance with political power. Though the first and third stands are both relevant to this second one, it is the second one in itself that has caused and does continue to cause most human suffering: the alliance of religious conviction with political power.

Dealing with this second one goes wider than religious liberty, for it is about controlling power in relation to every aspect of human freedom. It therefore raises fundamental questions of democracy and human rights. In the West democracy has arisen mainly in response to people’s desire for freedom—freedom to chose their governments and to pursue their own chosen goals, together with a growing emphasis on the implications of a belief in equality for public life. But Reinhold Niebuhr in his classic study The children of Light and the Children of Darkness argued that this was only half of the true justification for democracy and in some ways the less important part. The main argument is that there is a tendency to tyranny in human life. This has always been recognized and used as a justification for having government at all. We need strong government to stop us tearing one another apart. But Niebuhr’s point was that the potential tyrant capable of doing the greatest harm is always government itself, hence the crucial importance of having some way of controlling it. From this comes the classic separation of powers, into the executive, the legislature and the judiciary and fixed term periods of office after which a government can be voted out of power. Together with this in the USA and some other countries, there is a federal system whereby power is split between a central government and the states or regions of the country in question. So, in Niebuhr’s lapidary phrase
Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.³

A similar argument has recently been put forward by Christopher Insole. Like Niebuhr he argues that the strongest theological basis for liberal democracy is not an optimist view of human beings but an awareness of our frailty. Indeed his book is called The Politics of Human Frailty: A Theological Defence of Liberalism. Liberalism can mean many things, but what he is concerned to defend is a pluralistic society. He does this on the grounds that in our human frailty we are likely to be hubristic and oppressive when in power. So in a spirit of self-awareness and humility, it is best that my own religion, and from that also other people’s religion, is never in a position of oppressive power. So what he is arguing for is a society which is ordered towards minimizing conflict and maintaining individual liberties. As he put it-

The crucial ambition of this sort of “political liberalism” is a refusal to allow public power to enforce on society a substantial and comprehensive conception of the good; driven as it is by its central passion for the liberties of individuals.⁴

But democracy itself is not enough. There can be what Alexis de Tocqueville called a tyranny or despotism of the majority.⁵

So as Mill put it, the will of the people will in practice be the will of those who succeed in making themselves accepted as a majority and as he put it

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³ Reinhold Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, Nisbet 1945, p. vi
⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, Vol I, Chap xv
The people, consequently *may* desire to oppress a part of their number, and precautions are as much needed against this as against any other abuse of power.⁶

From this fundamental truth springs the need for legally accepted and enforced human rights. The human right to freedom of belief and worship for example, ensures that in a state where the majority are of one religion, those who adhere to minority religions can practice them without hindrance.

In this country the struggle for religious freedom has been a long and painful one. It is also painful and sobering for those who look to religions themselves to encourage tolerance, for the story is not so much one of enlightened religious people bringing about religious freedom for those with whom they disagreed, but religious tolerance coming about because of the pressure of political events and for political reasons. The last time religious passions erupted in violence in this country was in the civil war of the 17th century. There is a sense in which as a result of that war they blew themselves out. The restoration of the monarchy in 1660, followed by the so called glorious revolution of 1688 and then the Act of Toleration of 1689 which allowed Baptists and Presbyterians who were loyal to the crown to have their own places of worship, expressed an overwhelming sense that anything was better than a religious based conflict. Tolerance became a political necessity. It was a matter of profound conviction for someone like Locke, and some others, but it was political pragmatism that made it a reality. So it was with Catholic Emancipation in 1829. Peel the Prime Minister had opposed it and thought it was harmful, but he fought hard to obtain it because he believed that Civil War in Ireland would follow without it. Serious civil strife would ensue if Daniel O’Connell was not allowed to sit in the Parliament to which he had been elected because he was a

⁶ On Liberty, p.62
Catholic and this would be worse than letting Catholics sit. So only gradually, element by element, have the disabilities of non-Anglicans been removed over the last three centuries and there is of course still the very complex and tangled question of the Monarch not being allowed to be or to marry a Catholic.

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human rights says

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

This right is expressed in similar words in a number of other key documents, such as the European Convention.

Sadly, though lip service is often paid to the UN declaration, and its provisions have been signed up to in separate covenants by many countries, still too many manifest gross violations of the right to religious freedom. And although the emergence of democracy and human rights are very much bound up together, in the modern world, if one has to choose to give priority to one rather than the other, I would give it to human rights.

The third strand in this issue that I identified referred to the concern that all the Abraham faiths have with the totality of human life, political as well as personal. This obviously raises the question of the relationship between religion and the state. The starting point for Western liberals would probably be Locke, the American constitution and Mill. In short, the proper responsibility of the state is with the material circumstances of life and it has no role in relation to any religion or, following Mill, with private life. To put it the other way around, religions may try to influence public policy, but will have no privileged position. This means that
following the philosopher John Rawls, the state will try to achieve an overlapping consensus on issues of public policy, to which all religions can contribute. This raises the further issue about the language in which religions might contribute and here there is a big cultural divide between the United States and Britain. Despite the separation of church and state in the USA nearly all those campaigning for public office will make reference to God. This resonates in America in a way it does not in Britain. Indeed as we know from the experience of Tony Blair, the exact opposite is true here. Tony Blair, a deeply religious man did not use religious language in his politics because as he revealed in an interview after he resigned, he knew that if he did people would think him a “nutter” (his word). Some thoughtful theologians believe that Christians ought to make their contribution to the public debate in such a way as to reveal the Christian foundation of their views—and Islam also finds it natural to do that. Personally I have no difficulty with the British cultural position, not just on temperamental grounds but on theological ones as well. For believer or unbeliever, we have all been made in the image of God and part of what that means is that we have some capacity for discerning what is right and making sound judgements. That said, I can concede that there may be special circumstances or occasions when a clear reference to the basis of ones position is important, though for the most part I am happy to use the method of public reasoning advocated by John Rawls. It should not be assumed that those who argue for the strength of secular models in non-religious language do so out of a lack of religious conviction. Perhaps the most seriously devout of all our Prime Ministers in recent centuries has been Gladstone. The leading Gladstone scholar of our time, commemorating him in Oxford wrote

The striking paradox of Gladstone’s life was that this passionate Anglican, recognizing the impracticality of his theocratic vision, secularized Oxford and Cambridge universities, and British politics generally….his public personality was one of hope and progress:
political, ecclesiastical and educational structures could and must be changed, and sometimes drastically, to allow them to achieve their fundamental aims.\(^7\)

What I have said so far in relation to this third strand has taken for granted the Western liberal starting point. But that is, of course, disputable. You could argue that all societies are the product of particular histories, and those histories are bound up with religion. The result is that the predominant culture of most countries will be imbued with the beliefs and values of a religion, and except for consciously secular countries like France, or ones where the state is kept studiously neutral as far as religion is concerned as in America, it is likely that one religion will have a privileged position. Is that to be ruled out altogether in the modern world? Amartya Sen’s position is that a state can have a positive attitude to religion. This can involve much or little but the mark of a secular state is that it should treat all of them equally, and he holds out India as a model. But suppose we draw a distinction between matters of fundamental human rights and those of purely symbolic value? The role of public religious festivals for example? Is it acceptable to have something like the Church of England, which in some ways still has a privileged position, but one in which, I hope, there is no violation of the religious rights of any other body? That is a controversial question that I am not going to pursue further here. But I do want to raise the question.

There are two further considerations that bear upon this issue. The first is that nothing in this life is value free. Every institution in fact reflects certain values and these will be rooted in a particular view of life. Nothing in life is neutral. So the state, whether it likes it or not, will reflect certain values in its laws, customs and institutions. These are the ones that have been given it by its history and culture, both of which will have been crucially shaped by the

\(^7\) Colin Mathew, “Gladstone and the University of Oxford”, Oxford Magazine, Second Week Michaelmas Term 1999, p.5
predominant religion. Not only is this inevitable, given the fact that nothing can be neutral, there is nothing wrong in it in itself, provided fundamental rights and freedoms are observed.

Secondly, the Western liberal position associated with John Stuart Mill that the only reason to justify the state interfering with something in a person’s private life is if they are going to harm others, assumes a very narrow understanding of harm. It is possible to argue that certain forms of behaviour, though they take place in private, are such an affront to what that society regards as proper to existence as a human being, that they should be forbidden by law. This is of course a highly controversial area, which I am not going to pursue now, but it is important to note that there is an argument to be had.

I come now to the first strand of this issue, the seeds of intolerance that lie implicit in any claim to universal truth; what is believed to be a truth of such importance, a matter of life and death, that everyone ought to be able to see and respond to. There are two easy ways of avoiding the challenge faced by such claims, both widely held in the Western world, and both of which need to be rejected. One asks with Pilate “What is truth?” and does not stay for an answer, believing that truth in this area is impossible, and anyway all truth is relative. But the assumption behind any serious religious point of view is that it is possible to arrive at religious truth. Particular truths may be disputed or refuted, but truth is possible. The other easy way out is to suggest that all religions are essentially saying the same thing. But even a cursory study reveals that they are sometimes saying very different things. How can Zen Buddhism, which does not believe in God, be said to be saying the same thing as say Islam? And if it is then argued that behind the doctrines there is a core truth that they all share, what is that core truth, and who provides the criteria by which it is known? So those easy ways of avoiding the challenge of truth must be rejected.
Before any philosophy or theology take place it is I think important if at all possible simply to meet with people of other faiths, to encounter the living reality. This can take place is casual conversations at bus stops, or it can take more formal shape in structured dialogues. My own experience of the latter, first of all in Jewish Christian groups and then with Jews, Christians and Muslims in an Abrahamic Group has been invaluable and hugely enriching. Such personal meetings or encounters or structured dialogues work best if they are based on three principles. First of all letting the other person define themselves in their own terms. One of the features that bedevils relationships between religions is stereotypes; seeing people through spectacles provided by centuries of prejudice. So instead of assuming the other person believes this or that, it is vital to let them define themselves in their own way. Secondly, to explore and affirm as much common ground as possible-and there is common ground even between the religions that seem furthest apart. Thirdly, to explore areas of disagreement. It is a grave mistake to think that in inter-faith encounter you have to leave your most cherished beliefs behind as a pre-condition of entering into dialogue. On the contrary, for dialogue to be true dialogue, you have to take those beliefs into the relationship, and my experience is that in a group where there is respect and trust disagreements can be honestly shared as well as common ground affirmed.

In order to develop such relationships you do not need any particular theological basis to start off with. What matters is what emerges. Nevertheless, it helps to have a positive starting point, and I would again suggest three elements that it might contain.

First, a sense of the ultimate mystery of God. This is not agnosticism. As Gerard Manley Hopkins once put it to his friend Robert Bridges, what you mean by a mystery is an interesting uncertainty, what I mean is an incomprehensible certainty. There is
conviction there, but it is conviction about one of whom John of Damascus the great bastion of Christian orthodoxy in the 8th century wrote “What God is in himself is totally incomprehensible and unknowable.” The only appropriate response to this Divine mystery is humility.

Secondly, our apprehension of that Divine mystery will always be a finite, conditioned one. It may come to us through the most sacred revelation of absolute truth, but we grasp it in terms of our own culture and language. Moreover, no religion, whatever it thinks, is static. What we see in it, select in it and emphasise in it has changed, is changing and will continue to change. We are bedded down in human language and culture, and have no eagle’s eye view above all religions and cultures. Indeed it is hubris to think that we have such a divine perspective. Moreover, because of human sinfulness, our perspective will not only be finite and conditioned, but in some way distorted. It will be further distorted if we assert we stand above all this in some timeless, unconditioned way. So as Reinhold Niebuhr put it

Profound religion must recognize the difference between divine majesty and human creatureliness; between the unconditioned character of the divine and the conditioned character of all human enterprise. According to the Christian faith, the pride which seeks to hide the conditioned and finite character of all human endeavour is the very quintessence of sin. Religious faith ought therefore to be a constant fount of humility…it ought to teach them that their religion is most certainly true if it recognizes the element of error and sin, of finiteness and contingency, which creeps into the statement of even the sublimest truth….Religious toleration through religiously inspired humility and charity is always a difficult achievement. It requires that religious convictions be sincerely and devoutly held, while yet the sinful and finite
corruptions of these convictions be humble acknowledged and the actual fruits of others faiths be generously estimated.\(^8\)

My next principle takes up that last point. For my experience of religiously based encounters is that they are enlarging and enriching. There is mutual giving and receiving. Not only do you come to grasp the other religion in greater depth, it enables you to explore and discover depths in your own religion.

Finally, it is good to have a theological perspective which allows the most generous attitude possible to the insights of the other. Each faith will have its own way into this. To take just one example, I think of the group of Christian thinkers in the 2\(^{nd}\) century, generally called “The Apologists” who sought to relate Christian truth to the prevailing Greek and Roman philosophy. This was not a priority for the Christians of the New Testament period, who were trying to define themselves in relation to the Judaism from which they had split apart. But in the second century, as the church made inroads into the Graeco-Roman world, it became important to understand the faith in relation to the best thought of the time. They did not have to look any further than the prologue of St John’s Gospel for the Biblical basis of this approach. “In the beginning was the logos-the logos through whom all things came to be-the logos that continues to shine in our darkness. The logos was not only a key word for the Hebrew Scriptures, the Divine Word through whom all things came into existence and which spoke through the prophets, it was a key word for Greek philosophy, the principle of rationality that runs through all things and which we can grasp with our rational minds. So though at the heart of the Christian faith is the proclamation that the logos has become flesh, this logos is there already in our apprehensions of goodness, truth and beauty and our searching for religious truth. That is the way the second century thinkers chose

\(^8\) Reinhold Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, Nisbet, 1945, p.94/5
to write about God’s embrace of the whole world; not the only one, and as I say, the approach of each religion will be different. But the most generous way possible of including, rather than excluding others from the realm of religious truth does need to be found.

I have tried to suggest that in considering the issue of religious tolerance, there are three strands which must be considered in themselves, and here I take them in a different order from the one with which I began.

The first is the control of political power through the establishment of democratic mechanisms and the strict observance of human rights. This is crucial, because experience shows that religions by themselves have often badly failed to develop their own religious basis for tolerance. Human beings need to be protected against all forms of tyranny, including or even especially, religious tyranny. And they need to be protected, even in a democracy, by the upholding of human rights. As Niebuhr put it “Mans inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary”.

The second is the relationship within any society between its religions and political power, especially the relation between the dominant religion and the state. This is an area of ongoing debate. The current Western view that makes a sharp divide between the public and the private, between what belongs to the role of government and what belongs to religious institutions, all that many people mean by a secular state, will at least be questioned.

Then thirdly there is what religions themselves can and must provide from within their own theological and spiritual resources. This is that from a religious point of view we approach the partner in a religious dialogue with a sense of humility before the Divine Mystery, an awareness of the conditioned and finite nature of all human statements, even when they are held with deep conviction, and a sense that the universal presence in whom we believe is there
before and between us; and will be seeking to bless and enrich us through our mutual receiving and giving.