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On three philosophical premises of religious tolerance

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Abstract. My contention is to adumbrate three general premises leading to religious tolerance. The first is that emphasis should be laid much more on ethics than on metaphysics. Religions greatly differ in supernatural beliefs but all advocate justice, love, truthfulness, self-control and other virtues. Second, that beliefs about God are not true in their exact meaning, but rather as remote analogies to scientific truth. Religion is more resembling of poetry than science. Third, that real tolerance consists in the readiness to assimilate some of the values of other religions, since no one has expressed the transcendent in an exhausting and perfect way.

As we can read in Wikipedia, religious tolerance for most people signifies no more than "mere forbearance and the permission given by the adherents of a dominant religion for other religions to exist, even though the latter are looked on with disapproval as inferior, mistaken, or harmful". I want to argue that the demands of forbearance or the peaceful coexistence of religions are not enough, and constitute only a first step to fruitful communication between them. I will outline three general premises which may justify tolerance on a deeper level of understanding and spiritual communication between people belonging to different religions and cultures.

I.

The first is **the priority of ethics over metaphysics**. Under the term "metaphysics" I understand beliefs relating to the nature of God, the afterlife, the migration of souls, miracles, the beginning and end of the world, etc. Such beliefs play an enormous role in social life, although their distinctive feature is that they are totally unverifiable by science. They provide millions of people with spiritual energy and the feeling that life has sense, which should be appreciated instead of demanding – as radical atheists do – that they be eradicated from human awareness. However, such beliefs are also a threat to social peace, because most of those who adhere to them regard them to be literally true. The past fifteen years have seen at least partly religiously inspired social conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, as well as in Afghanistan, India, Iran, Iraq, Kosovo, Macedonia, Northern Ireland, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Sudan. Also Poles are divided by conservative-religious views on abortion, prenatal diagnosis, in vitro conception, homosexuality, women's rights and the political influence of the Church.

Already two centuries ago Arthur Schopenhauer pointed out that religions differed considerably in their metaphysics, but were very similar ethically. Indeed, the fundamental differences between religions are visible already in their conception of God and divinity. The Biblical religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) personify God, in Hinduism and Confucianism He is impersonal, and Buddhism does without a God altogether. Christians believe in a single incarnation of God, Hinduists in multiple incarnations. In Christianity sacramental rites and obedience to the doctrine of the Church are essential premises of salvation, something that does not appear in any other religion. Buddhism and Hinduism profess reincarnation, Biblical religions do not. There are many more differences, but the ones listed sufficiently warrant the claim that it would be difficult to build one, global religion from supernatural beliefs alone.

Therefore, in seeking inter-religious communication emphasis should be laid on ethical content that is common to all faiths, and not on their doctrinal differences. In more recent times this approach has been propounded by philosophers of religion known as pluralists, like Paul F. Knitter, Raimundo Pannikar, Perry Schmidt-Leukel, John Hick and others. Paul F. Knitter, a retired theology professor at Xavier University in Cincinnati, writes: "doctrines and beliefs have to appear in the court of ethics before they can be admitted to the churches and schools of Christianity, and the same refers to every other religion" (Knitter 2005 [2002]: 135). According to the religious pluralists all major religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Chinese Universalism – are able to lead humans to salvation or liberation by their ethics. They all profess the golden rule that others should be treated as we ourselves would wish to be treated, condemn hatred and greed, and advocate love, compassion, truthfulness, tolerance, mildness, self-control, etc. It is also impossible to prove by statistics or in any other way that the followers of any of these religions are morally inferior or superior to those of the others. Thus, ethic is the surest foundation for inter-religious tolerance, and this view is shared by sensible representatives of various faiths. As English religion philosopher John Hick rightly wrote: "the test by which both Christians and people of the other major faiths judge the authenticity of religious experience is its moral and spiritual fruit in human life" (Hick 2004[1989]: XXVI).

II.

The second religious tolerance premise is the awareness that **we possess no objective knowledge about the divine and absolute**, and only such knowledge could be universally binding. Most philosophers of religion and leading theologians and mystics agree on this point. "We cannot know who God is, only who He is not", Thomas Aquinas wrote in *Summa contra gentiles* (I, 30). Knowledge is cognition certain and testable by others, and already the very existence of God fails to meet these conditions as it is neither certain nor intersubjectively testable. Indeed, as Herbert Spencer accurately noted, all cognition takes place through (mostly unaware) reference to something else: „in every proposition, a thought involves relations, difference, likeness. Whatever does not present each of these does not admit of cognition" (Spencer 1946 [1862]: 66). We would not know what day is if we had no knowledge of night, nor what red is if there were no other colours. But God cannot be compared with anything save another deity, which, however, would negate the very definition of God as the only one and infinite being. This is why Christian philosophers themselves admit that anything said about God can only be a remote analogy to created beings, although many philosophers

prefer the term metaphor, which is an even more imprecise and ambiguous cognition tool than analogy.

The source of rational statements about God is, perforce, the world, both in its physical and social/cultural dimension. However, both ordinary people as well as philosophers tend to differ in their perception of the physical world: some see it as sensible, good and trustworthy, others as indifferent to living beings, deaf, unfathomed and full of unexplainable evil and suffering. These different interpretations of the world find reflection both in the optimistic philosophies of, for instance, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and the pessimistic conceptions of Arthur Schopenhauer, Sören Kierkegaard or Jean-Paul Sartre. The social/cultural world seems to offer similarly weak grounds for belief in the existence of God, as human history has experienced too much warfare, genocide and repression of the weak during which God invariably remained silent. Thus, if despite everything we were to accept His existence, we would have to simultaneously accept that His nature and relation to the world are in the highest degree mysterious. His revelation to human minds is very subtle and unimposing, leaving ample room for atheists and sceptics. This is why contemporary philosophy of religion, unlike its counterparts in the Middle Ages and even during the Enlightenment, is moving away from proving God's existence towards unsubstantiated faith, which requires no strong demonstration. Here the existence of God manifests itself in a positive interpretation and evaluation of the world as a whole, and not a conclusion logically founded in the laws of causality, contingency or purposefulness (cf. Hick 2010).

Biblical religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) profess that God, knowing that humans would find it hard to accept His existence on the strength of their natural cognitive powers, revealed Himself to them through prophets like Moses, Jesus or Mohammed. However, they differ considerably in their interpretation of this revelation. Moreover, the Bible contains historical, natural, cosmological and, from today's vantage point, moral errors and inaccuracies. God in the Old Testament is not the father of mankind but the father of one people who condones the ethnical purges this people carries out on its neighbours. Therefore, today even the Church's conservative wing admits that not everything which is contained in the Bible is revelation but only that which pertains to human salvation. This is a very general criterion which signifies a retreat from the literal interpretation of the Bible, which until the nineteenth century gave ground for intolerance towards dissenters, heretics and atheists (see Pontifical Biblical Commission: 1993).

Today's global religions emerged in the pre-scientific era, when legends, myths and sagas were the accepted means of expressing abstract ideas. Therefore, their accounts of miracles as well as some of their historical information should not be taken word for word today, but rather perceived as poetry. As U. S. philosopher George Santayana assures, religion is better when understood as good poetry than bad knowledge (Santayana 1900). Here narrow dogmatism makes way for inter-religious dialogue, because there is no one "true" faith but many equal visions of transcendence. This is contested by the conservative wings of the revealed religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam and some variations of Hinduism). In these circles not only many so-called ordinary, but also highly educated people believe that God revealed many truths unequivocally and as universally binding. This approach leaves no room for inter-religious tolerance and dialogue, because God is not to be disputed with. Therefore, it is important to teach (as Karl Jaspers does) that Revelation and the very concept of Revelation is not literal

but symbolic truth or, as Jaspers himself puts it, encoded truth (cipher). According to Jaspers religious faith can be decoded by conscience but not by a universally binding interpretation (Jaspers 1999 [1962] *passim*).

III.

The third philosophical premise of religious tolerance is **openness towards the Other**. This is much more than tolerance understood as peaceful coexistence (as it is usually defined). Openness means showing interest in religious systems other than one's own, and the readiness to take from them what appears as good, beautiful and creative. This readiness bases on the knowledge that no man, group or culture possesses the whole truth about religion (or anything else for that matter), nor has ever expressed such truth in an only appropriate and perfect way. This especially concerns religious beliefs, which are by their nature the least precise of all beliefs and resemble poetry more than knowledge. One can indeed presume that a friendly interest in other religious and ethical systems can prove enriching for one's own religious experience.

Openness to other existential systems (also to absence of faith, which is a quite separate issue), the readiness to take over certain of their values, is the second, higher level of tolerance. The first only involves acceptance of their existence in multicultural society. For instance a Christian can become interested in the fact that Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism profess an energy that can be obtained by practices which unite with the cosmos, or released within oneself, where it lies dormant and weighed down by our daily troubles. The Biblical religions primarily strive to free man from his sense of guilt, the Far-Eastern religions, especially Buddhism, focus on reducing human suffering. The concepts of sin and suffering, as well as the practices that relate to them, are not contradictory and can complement each other, because many people suffer under a strong sense of guilt, while many others feel guiltless but unhappy. The former will turn to confession and charitable deeds, the latter to Yoga and Tai-Chi.

The Far-Eastern religions know no eternal hell, their hell lasts as long as it takes to burn out "bad karma". This appears more humane and just than what the Biblical religions teach. Eastern religions also have an Ahimsa (compassion) ethic which extends to animals. This is a value worth absorbing by the followers of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, whose scriptures do not forbid them to kill animals, although they do command their humane treatment. Followers of Far-Eastern religions may want to adopt the Biblical religions' faith in divine interference in individual and social history, or the concept of divine providence. This idea, also propounded by the ancient-Greek Stoics, is a source of optimism as it offers a vision of life guided by God's compassionate hand rather than blind contingency and emphasises the value of humans as individuals. Human rights, the pride of Western civilisation, are partly inspired by the Bible, which frequently appeals for the protection of widows, orphans, foreigners and the poor (see Wojciechowski 2010). Also, no other religion has such a systematised theology as Christianity. Theology, or rational reflection on the content of Revelation, allows far-going reconciliation of Revelation with the findings of science and philosophy. For example Christian theology (bar its conservatives) accepts evolution and Christian clergy are required to possess at least some philosophical training. These examples show that certain values professed by the Far-Eastern religions may prove enriching for the

spiritual life of Christians, and vice-versa, followers of Far-Eastern religions may find something worthwhile to take from Christians.

To sum up, I outlined three premises of thought and activity which might enhance greater religious tolerance in our times. The first is the fact that today's global religions differ greatly in their supernatural beliefs but are quite alike in their basic ethical codes. Ethics is what binds people and what should be the focus of attention. The second premise is the awareness that objective knowledge about divinity and the afterlife is unattainable, and that they can only be expressed in poetic and mythological terms which have no grounding in science, and whose literal reception, although prevalent, breeds intolerance. The third premise is the awareness that true religious tolerance means not only consent to the free expression of religions that are different from ours, but the readiness to absorb some of their values. No religion has a monopoly for truth and good, each expresses transcendence in its own fragmented and imperfect way. I believe it advisable for such ideas to be a part of school education.

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