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Beyond tolerance: towards a new step in inter-religious relationships[1]

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Abstract

In section I the author of this inaugural lecture (of the new Chair of World Religions for Peace at the University of Glasgow) seeks to clarify the meaning of 'tolerance' and argues in favour of its traditional understanding as tolerating what is disapproved. The necessity of practising tolerance in this sense is defended in section II. However – as is explained in section III – given this understanding of tolerance, the concept is no longer adequate to characterise the Christian attitude towards other religions, which has frequently started to move 'beyond tolerance' towards appreciation. Section IV closes with a brief discussion of those theological and christological presuppositions that are required in order to complete this move.

In contemporary Western societies and especially in the field of interfaith work and inter-religious dialogue, the call for religious tolerance has become almost generally accepted. It seems to go without saying that you *have* to be tolerant. But despite this widespread demand for tolerance, it is less clear what precisely is to be understood by tolerance. And even less is the further question asked whether tolerance is really the ultimate ideal for inter-religious relationships, or whether there might be something beyond tolerance. Therefore I would like to address the following four questions: (1) What does, or, better, what should 'tolerance' mean? (2) Why is tolerance important? (3) Why and when should we move beyond tolerance? (4) How can we, as Christians, make such a move?

I

Let us start with the meaning of 'tolerance'. Once a key term of the Enlightenment, 'tolerance' has presently become a rather confused notion. For example, if both partners in a marriage live in open adultery, this has come to be called a 'tolerant marriage'. Another curious but nevertheless typical example is given by Wendy Brown in one of her recent articles. She

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mentions her experience with the head teacher of a Jewish school. When asked how the school deals with families in which only one of the parents is Jewish, he replied without any irony: 'We teach tolerance.'[2] What does it mean, comments Wendy Brown, when we teach our children to tolerate their parents? Another – and, to my mind, the most confusing – use of the word 'tolerance' is the broad tendency to speak of intolerance in cases where someone criticises an opinion or belief that differs from his or her own as being untrue or false or bad. This usage implies an understanding of *tolerance as approval* and seems to be especially common in inter-religious affairs. Harold Netland is obviously right in diagnosing 'a widespread assumption today that being genuinely tolerant of another religion means that one will not say anything negative about its basic beliefs. On this assumption . . . the tolerant person is willing to say that the claims of all religions are in some sense true.'[3]

There are two reasons why I think that such an understanding of tolerance as approval is heavily misleading and even in a sense dangerous. First, if we equate tolerance with a prohibition of opposing or even with the duty of accepting what we in fact consider to be wrong and false, this would – as Netland says – amount to 'intellectual suicide'.[4] In the last resort it would undermine the basis of all opposition and disagreement, namely the law of non-contradiction. And therefore it does not come as a surprise that you sometimes find authors who attack what they dismiss as Aristotelian or, more generally, as Western logic and who at the same time assure an understanding of tolerance as approval, blaming so-called Aristotelian logic as the final basis for intolerance. But if you remove the principle of non-contradiction from any kind of logic, what remains will no longer be a logic at all. And therefore it would be intellectually suicidal to sacrifice logic for the sake of tolerance.

Second, I think it is absolutely correct to consider tolerance as an ideal which is highly important for living together peacefully in a pluralistic society and indeed in a pluralistic world. But if we affirm this, and imply at the same time a meaning of tolerance as approval, this will result in the view 'that we can live peacefully together *only* with those people with whom we agree in all basic questions'.[5] Such a view would be counter-

[2] Cf. Wendy Brown, 'Reflexionen über Toleranz im Zeitalter der Identität', in R. Forst (ed.), *Toleranz: Philosophische Grundlagen und gesellschaftliche Praxis einer umstrittenen Tugend* (Frankfurt/Main and New York: Campus, 2000), pp. 259f.

[3] Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 306.

[4] Ibid., p. 305.

[5] So – opposing this view – Winfried Härle, 'Der Toleranzgedanke im Verhältnis der

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productive, contradicting the original point of the Enlightenment idea of toleration. This idea was proposed to provide a basis for living together peacefully, or at least non-violently, *in face of* various kinds of disagreements. That is, the concept of tolerance was designed to work in a situation of social and/or religious disagreement and tension, and not for the concealment or denial of conflicts.

So again Harold Netland is correct when he points out that – at least originally – 'tolerance involves . . . acceptance of something toward which one has a negative estimation' and 'has an element of disapproval built into its meaning'.[6] Fortunately, this reflects something of what could be called a consensus among the more recent philosophical discussions of the concept of tolerance. As Rainer Forst points out, tolerance 'implies always a normative condemnation and disapproval of the tolerated beliefs and practices'.[7] Or – to quote T. M. Scanlon – 'tolerance requires us to accept people and permit their practices even when we strongly disapprove of them'.[8]

II

Having indicated which understanding of 'tolerance' I prefer, we can now move to the next question: why 'tolerance' – in the sense of tolerating what is disapproved – is important or even necessary. With that question we are of course entering the vast field of ethical and political discussion and we could easily get lost in the intricacies and complexities of how to establish the basics of ethics, or in the complicated details of political judgements with their broad grey areas and uncertainties. Let me therefore only mention a few basic points and restrict myself mainly to the question of religious tolerance.

First of all, it seems to make sense to distinguish between on the one hand tolerance as a guideline for political action primarily related to the state, and on the other hand tolerance as a moral demand primarily relevant to the behaviour of individuals or individual groups. The famous '*sapere aude*' of the Enlightenment, that is, its demand to use one's reason without any restrictions, was primarily addressed to individuals, whereas its demand for religious toleration seems to be mainly related to the state and its insti-

Religionen', in W. E. Müller and H. H. R. Schulz (eds), *Theologie und Aufklärung* (Festschrift für G. Hornig; Würzburg, 1992), p. 327.

[6] Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, p. 307.

[7] 'Zu ihr gehört stets eine normative Verurteilung und Ablehnung der tolerierten Überzeugungen und Praktiken.' R. Forst, 'Einleitung', in Forst (ed.), *Toleranz*, p. 9.

[8] T. M. Scanlon, 'The Difficulty of Tolerance', in David Heyd (ed.), *Toleration: An Elusive Virtue* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), p. 227.

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tutions. To be tolerant means primarily that the state should grant equal rights and freedom of religious practice indiscriminately to all kinds of religious groups and churches. For the religious individual, or for the individual religious community, the quest for tolerance requires that their own specific religious beliefs and convictions permit them to accept and support the ideal of a tolerant state.

These Enlightenment ideas, now more than 200 years old, have been reaffirmed in the most recent debates on 'tolerance'. To quote Scanlon once more: 'the attitude toward others that tolerance requires must be understood in terms of specific rights and protections' – for example, the right to 'speak', that is, to contribute to social and political communication and 'to set an example through one's conduct, to have one's way of life recognized through specific forms of official support'.[9] Clearly, it's here that the problems begin. For how can I or how could any religious community accept the idea that the state should tolerate and even in some sense support beliefs and practices that I or my religious community does not and cannot approve? If tolerance includes the element of disapproval and if tolerance is primarily about the public granting of equal rights and support, it seems to be self-contradictory to accept the idea of tolerance, that is, to demand freedom and support for something that I or my religious community do not appreciate at all. Or, as Bernard Williams puts it: 'Toleration, we may say, is required only for the intolerable. That is the basic problem.'[10]

Consequently, the basic problem is how to justify this kind of tolerance. Among all the arguments that have been put forward in favour of tolerance, on my view at least, three seem to be most important.

The first one is the pragmatic argument of the lesser evil. This is to say, tolerance can and should be recommended as a lesser evil than violent conflict. Especially when related to tensions between religious groups, these groups themselves might come to accept that it is a lesser evil to tolerate the other than to face a complete disruption of peace within or between societies. The strength of this argument was convincingly illustrated by the confessional wars in Europe, which are therefore rightly regarded as the main historical force behind the rise of the Enlightenment ideal of religious toleration. But on the other hand, the evident weakness of the pragmatic argument is that it does not work in a situation in which one of the parties is much stronger than the other. Thus it does not apply when it comes to the rights and protection of small minorities or even individuals, whose

[9] Ibid., p. 235.
[10] B. Williams, 'Toleration: An Impossible Virtue', in Heyd (ed.), *Toleration*, p. 18.

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beliefs and practices are disapproved of by the majority and who could be easily silenced by the majority without risking anything.

This apparent weakness of the pragmatic argument can be redeemed by a *second* argument which understands tolerance as something intrinsically connected with the value of individual autonomy. One can disapprove of certain beliefs and practices but still support the view that the supporter of these beliefs and practices should nevertheless be respected and protected in his or her individual freedom to hold or pursue them, even when such people form a small minority. The idea of individual autonomy and its great value is rightly associated with the central conceptions of Enlightenment. But it is not at all exclusively dependent on it. There can be diverse reasons and justifications for such an estimation of individual autonomy, and surely one among them is the ancient Christian conviction that individual faith, saving faith, must be free. You find this idea already clearly expressed in the writings of Tertullian in the third century,[11] and it was reaffirmed again and again until it finally merged into the more general idea of individual autonomy, a development for which John Locke's famous *Letter Concerning Toleration* provides a clear example. But the fact that freedom of faith was – if not always, but nevertheless frequently – reaffirmed by Christian theologians demonstrates that this affirmation was still obviously not strong enough to establish the ideal of religious tolerance. You can even find the same theologian both defending the freedom of faith and yet arguing in favour of religious intolerance, as was for example the case with Thomas Aquinas.[12] According to Aquinas, faith must be free and cannot be forced, but at the same time it must be protected from the evil influence of heretics. Thus Aquinas was on the one hand opposing any converting of non-Christians by violent means, but on the other hand defending violence against Christians with deviant theological convictions. His main argument was that by distorting the true faith Christian heretics threaten the eternal salvation of believers and thus constitute one of the worst evils. But if the use of violence is justified in fighting lesser evils, for example in order to safeguard one's earthly well-being, it must be even more legitimate when it is necessary to protect the eternal well-being of the people. This type of argument is in no way an exclusively Thomistic one, but was regularly used in theological debates on religious tolerance. Thus a standard topic from the early church onwards was to compare the activity of so-called heretics with the spread of a dangerous pestilence.[13] It therefore seemed not only justified

[11] *Patrologia Latina* (PL), ed. J. P. Migne (Paris, 1844–55), vol. 1, col. 777.

[12] Cf. Aquinas's discussions in *Summa Theologica*, II/II, qq. 10 and 11.

[13] Cf. R. I. Moore, 'Heresy as Disease', in W. Lourdaux and D. Verhelst (eds), *The Concept of Heresy in the Middle Ages (11th–13th c.)* (Leuven, 1983), pp. 1–11.

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but even ethically necessary to employ all means to eliminate the dangerous virus and protect the people from becoming victims of the plague.

Defenders of religious tolerance, few as they in fact were, put forward a counter-argument which I regard as the *third* important point in favour of religious tolerance. It can properly be called a sceptical argument despite the fact that it began as a theological one. It refers to the biblical parable of the tares among wheat (Matt 12:24ff.). If someone has sown tares among wheat, it would not be wise to try to gather up the tares, since one might very well root up the wheat with them. Jesus therefore finishes the parable thus: 'Allow both to grow together until the harvest.' Christian defenders of religious tolerance made use of this parable and argued that in religious affairs it is frequently quite uncertain what and who are tares and who are the wheat. In persecuting the so-called heretics, we run the risk of killing those who are truly justified in the eyes of God. This argument can and should be stretched so far as to rule out any religious intolerance based on the argument of protecting people from eternal damnation. It is simply not certain enough whether there really is eternal damnation, and if so what would lead to it, for this to be used as grounds for justifying intolerant political means. For some people, belief in hell might be an integral part of their religious world view, but even they should concede that belief is not the same as indubitable knowledge. In matters of eternal things there might be enough light and enough darkness to take one's own personal risk of faith, but there is not enough light to risk the life of one's neighbour.

Let me resume. If we keep the original meaning of tolerance and understand it as toleration of the disapproved, the three arguments I have described seem to me to be still valid and important in justifying tolerance. But of course, such an understanding of tolerance implies that there are also limits to tolerance. Not everything that we disapprove can or should be tolerated. Things can became so evil that they are no longer tolerable. For example, tolerance cannot be regarded as the lesser evil when it comes to the question of whether one should tolerate something like Hitler's Nazism. Or consider the cases where tolerance cannot be justified by individual autonomy – for instance, when an individual commits a crime, or when that which is to be tolerated is itself an attack on individual autonomy. And the evil consequences of some beliefs and practices – in the field of religion and elsewhere – can sometimes be so evident that there is no longer room for any doubt as to whether this would cause serious harm to people or not. Cases like these clearly set limits to tolerance.

But I would like to turn now to a very different kind of limits to tolerance. Not limits where we have to ask ourselves whether the intolerable can be justifiably tolerated any longer, but limits where we have to ask

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ourselves whether tolerance is the proper attitude towards something which does not deserve our tolerance, but rather our wholehearted appreciation. This brings us to the third question, of why and when we have to move beyond tolerance.

III

The history of religions in general and of Christianity in particular gives the impression that in inter-religious encounters religions have only two options: the option of violence or the option of tolerance. One religion can either fight against another one – trying to eliminate it or at least to keep it in a marginal or weak or distant position – or it can tolerate it as something which is not approved, but must be endured and can perhaps be peacefully overcome one day through missionary activity. But is there really no third option? Are religions bound only either to fight or to tolerate one another? I believe there is a real alternative, and this alternative is genuine appreciation. I am convinced there are good reasons why religions could and should come to a deep and far-reaching approval and appreciation of each other. Here I have to speak primarily from my own religious background as a Christian theologian. During the twentieth century many Christian churches, or at least many of their theologians and believers, came to accept that other religions can be valid ways of salvation for their non-Christian members. For example, in 1991 the Roman Catholic Church affirmed in an official Vatican document that non-Christians can find salvation 'in the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious traditions'.[14] And an official consultation of the World Council of Churches from 1990 declared that the plurality of religious traditions is regarded 'as both the result of the manifold ways in which God has related to peoples and nations as well as a manifestation of the richness and diversity of humankind'.[15] Such affirmations result from the broad process of inter-religious dialogue and encounter which started in the twentieth century and which – perhaps for the first time in human history – has led so many believers in all religions to a recognition of the precious values and insights enshrined in other religious traditions.

Let me give a few examples that highlight what I want to say. In the First Epistle of John (4:7f.) we read:

> everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

[14] *Dialogue and Proclamation*, no. 29.

[15] *Religious Plurality: Theological Perspectives and Affirmations* (Baar Statement, 1990).

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Many Christians would agree that here the quintessence of the divine revelation through Jesus is expressed. But now consider the following statements.

In the writings of the Shivaite saint Tiru-Mûlar we find the essence of Hindu revelation summarised as:

> The ignorant say 'Love and God are different' and do not know that love and God are identical. As soon as they realize that love and God are the same, they will rest in God's love.[16]

In Zen-Buddhism the cardinal meaning of the Buddhist Dharma is summarised in the famous phrase 'Mind is Buddha', a phrase which stems originally from an Amida Buddhist scripture. Shinran Shonin, the founder of the Amida-Buddhist Jodo-Shinshu, gave this verse the following interpretation:

> The aspiration for Buddhahood is the aspiration to save all beings. The aspiration to save all beings is the mind that grasps sentient beings and brings them to birth in the Pure Land of Happiness. This mind is the mind of ultimate equality. It is great compassion. This mind attains Buddhahood. *This mind* is Buddha.[17]

A summarising of the qur'anic revelation is given in one of Muhammad's *hadiths* referring to the heavenly Qur'an, which expresses the eternal revelational original of God's attitude towards his creation. The hadith reads:

> When Allah decreed the Creation, He pledged Himself by writing in His book which is laid down with Him: 'My mercy prevails over My wrath.'[18]

In earlier times Christian theologians simply ignored the existence of such insights in other religious traditions, or – as for example in the case of Karl Barth – denied them any authenticity. Today, however, a large number of theologians are ready to accept them as genuine reflections of salvific divine revelation. When religions cease from regarding each other as pagans and unbelievers, but instead start to recognise the clear signs of salvific divine presence in other traditions, the concept of 'tolerance' is no longer a proper designation of their mutual relationships. It was the

[16] Quoted in J. Neuner (ed.), *Hinduismus und Christentum* (Freiburg: Herder, 1962), p. 150.

[17] *Passages on the Pure Land Way*. A translation of Shinran's Jôdo monrui jushô, ed. Yoshifumi Ueda (Shin Buddhism Translation Series; Kyoto, 1982), p. 53, emphasis mine.

[18] *Forty Hadith Qudsi*. Selected and translated by Ezzeddin Ibrahim und Denys Johnson-Davies (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1997), p. 40.

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German historian of religion Gustav Mensching who already in the 1950s and 1960s distinguished between what he called 'formal tolerance' and 'substantial tolerance'. He defined 'formal tolerance' as 'the mere toleration of foreign religion within a certain area' and 'substantial tolerance' as 'the acknowledgement of foreign religion and practice as a chance to encounter holy reality'.[19] The latter, says Mensching, is what we need today. I think that Mensching's intention was basically right. But for the reasons I gave earlier, I think his terminology is misleading. Instead of introducing distinctions like 'formal' and 'substantial tolerance', it seems to be much clearer to speak of a move beyond tolerance towards appreciation or substantial approval. Consider someone who so far has only enjoyed classical music but happens to discover some fine jazz like – let's say – Keith Jarrett, and now starts to like it, we surely would not say that she has now become 'tolerant' towards jazz, but that she has enlarged her musical horizon and now appreciates not only classics but also some contemporary music. She might have been 'tolerant' towards jazz in earlier times, when she was not able to recognise the beauty in it, but nevertheless tolerated it as something which was – from her earlier view – unfortunately liked by some other people.

Let's come back to the churches. Despite the fact that the move beyond tolerance and towards inter-religious appreciation has undeniably and to a broad extent begun, this move is very often still an incomplete one. For many Christian theologians have stopped at what is often called an inclusivist position: that is, they are willing to acknowledge the revealing and salvific divine presence in other religions but still insist on the unique superiority of their own religion. Whatever is good and true and holy in other religions is regarded by them as elements and fragments of the uniquely superior revelation that has happened in Christ. In Christ alone the full and complete revelation is given. Thus non-Christians – as was emphasised in the Vatican document *Dominus Jesus* (August 2000) – 'can receive divine grace', but nevertheless 'they are in a greatly deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the church, have the fullness of the means of salvation'.[20]

This means that, despite the acknowledgement of a genuine and saving divine presence in other religions, these religions are still regarded as having only a provisional value compared to one's own. And if one believes

[19] Gustav Mensching, 'Das Christentum in den Auseinandersetzungen der Religionen heute', in E. von Dungern (ed.), *Das große Gespräch der Religionen* (München and Basel, 1964), p. 26; cf. also Mensching's *Toleranz und Wahrheit in der Religion* (Heidelberg, 1955), p. 161.

[20] *Dominus Jesus*, no. 22.

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that Christianity, or a specific Christian church, encompasses a uniquely superior revelation, and alone provides the fullness of the means of salvation, then one must desire that all people should become members of that church. If Christianity is in an objective sense the best of all religions, and if you wish for your neighbour only the best, then you will wish that everybody should become a Christian. But this implies that all other religions should disappear in favour of the single superior religion, or even of one specific version of it. But since this ideal might be difficult, or realistically even impossible, to attain, the other religions are to be tolerated. They are tolerated as something which should ideally disappear, but which has to be accepted or endured as long as it is there, and they can be tolerated since there is some limited or provisional value to them. Thus the consequence of the inclusivist option is that the move beyond tolerance cannot be completed. If we therefore want to ask our last question, whether and how we as Christians can really go beyond tolerance towards a genuine theological appreciation of other religions, we have to ask whether and how we can move beyond inclusivism, or more precisely beyond the conviction that Christianity alone is uniquely superior to all other religions, to an acknowledgement of them as in principle equally valid ways of salvation.

IV

Of course there are many psychological reasons why people so naturally consider their own religion as the best of all. But when we ask for more objective or logical reasons in relation to Christianity, there are basically two rocks on which the Christian claim to superiority seems to be based. The one is the idea that all religions are built around different and contradictory ideas of a divine or transcendent or salvific reality and that the most adequate description of the divine can thus be available only in one among all of them, and that this is the Christian doctrine of a triune God. The other reason is the closely connected idea that this triune God has revealed himself most fully through the unique incarnation of the second person of the trinity, in Jesus.

Unfortunately it is not possible at this point to enter into a deeper discussion of the notions of trinity and incarnation. But I want to indicate how we can, and how in fact some theologians have already begun to, understand both of these doctrines in a sense that no longer entails or substantiates a claim to a singular superiority of Christianity, and which therefore enables us to complete our move beyond tolerance towards a genuine appreciation of God's saving presence in other religions.

The theological tradition of Christianity has almost without any excep-

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tion affirmed that, in the last sense, there can be no positive description of God in human terms, since God as an infinite reality exceeds infinitely the inevitable limitations of all human concepts and words. And *this* is exactly the one proper mark that characterises a truly transcendent reality. Thus Aquinas is to be taken quite literally when he says: 'This is the utmost of human knowledge of God, to know that we do not know God.'[21] Or in the very clear words of Anselm of Canterbury, that God 'is not only that than which a greater cannot be conceived, but . . . greater than can be conceived'.[22] God must be inconceivable, Anselm explains, for only if God is greater than we can conceive is it sure that he is really God, namely that than which no greater can be conceived.[23]

The broad theological tradition of affirming such an apophatic stance regarding our talk about God includes by implication also any trinitarian language. Some of the fathers have been very explicit on that. For example, Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite affirms that God is 'neither one nor three',[24] and Nicolai de Cusa states that 'considered in [his] pure infinity this is neither father nor son nor holy spirit . . .; neither one nor many'.[25]

Unfortunately, the theological tradition has not devoted much effort to explaining how this so-called 'negative theology' is compatible with all the positive utterances about God. How are the positive characterisations of God, for example as a trinity, to be understood in face of the apophatic insight? Of course there is the famous doctrine of analogy. But rather than really solving the problem, it comes closer to an exposition of it. For to say that our terms do not apply to God in a literal or univocal sense but in an analogical one, without giving any clue as to how to decipher the analogy, amounts to saying that we do not really understand what we say when we talk about God.[26]

In contemporary theology many theologians have developed a new kind of religious hermeneutics. They propose – in different versions – that our

[21] 'Illud est ultimum cognitionis humanae de deo quod sciat se deum nescire.' Aquinas, *De potentia*, 7.5.

[22] St Anselm, *Basic Writings*, trans. S. N. Deane (Chicago: Open Court, 2nd edn 1962 [1996]), p. 68.

[23] 'Ergo, Domine, non solum es quo maius cogitare nequit, sed es quiddam maius quam cogitari possit. Quoniam namque valet cogitari esse aliquid huiusmodi: si tu non es hoc ipsum, potest cogitari aliquid maius te; quod fieri nequit.' *Proslogion* 15.

[24] *De divinis nominibus* 13.3.

[25] 'secundum considerationem infinitatis nec pater nec filius nec spiritus sanctus . . .; nec unum est nec plura.' *De docta ignorantia* I, cp. 24 p. 88.

[26] Peter Vardy rightly summarises Aquinas's position as: 'We can say that language about God can truly be applied to God, but we do not know what this language means when it is so applied.' Peter Vardy, *The Puzzle of God* (London: HarperCollins, 1990), p. 42.

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positive utterances about God should not be understood as straightforward descriptions of an indescribable, since infinite, reality, but as referring to specific and finite forms of human experiences of this infinite reality. To speak of God as a trinity of father, son and holy spirit should be understood as referring to three basic modes of human experiences of God. Thus 'God the Father' indicates the experience of an ultimate source of all reality mediated through something like Schleiermacher's 'feeling of absolute dependency'; 'God the Son' indicates the experience of God as it is mediated through human beings who are so resonant with divine reality that they become transparent to it – and of course for the Christian this means especially the experience of God as it was and still is mediated through the life of Jesus; and finally the talk of 'God the Spirit' indicates the experience of an intimate divine presence in human hearts, challenging and empowering us to live our lives in openness to God and our neighbour.

Now, what I want to emphasise is this: if we would understand the positive utterances about transcendent reality that we find in the religions as immediate descriptions of that reality, this would contradict our best insights into the essential ineffability of transcendence. Therefore we should rather understand them as referring to certain aspects and forms of human God-experiences. But if we supply such a hermeneutics, it is no longer necessary to regard the different utterances about transcendence that we find within the religions as conflicting claims about that reality, among which only one can be true. Accordingly, to speak of God as a trinity in the indicated sense does not imply regarding all other talk about transcendence as wrong or insufficient, but can set us free to discover how the God-experiences that are connected with other expressions are related to the ones that are expressed in Christian trinitarian language. As a consequence, trinitarian language must no longer be regarded as an insurmountable barrier in our move beyond tolerance.

Concerning our incarnational language, the last three decades with their intense theological debates about Christology have led a growing number of theologians to an understanding of incarnation that neither contradicts the true humanity of Jesus, nor is restricted to one single instance. The two most recent major studies in the field of Christology, John Macquarrie's *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*[27] and Roger Haight's *Jesus – Symbol of God*[28] reflect an understanding of incarnation according to which (I quote Macquarrie)

> incarnation was not a singularity or anomaly in world history but is a constant characteristic of God's relation to his creation. There are, one

[27] John Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (London: SCM, 1990).
[28] Roger Haight, *Jesus – Symbol of God* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999).

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> may say, degrees of incarnation. Christians believe that in Jesus Christ there has taken place an incarnation of the divine Logos adequate to our human needs. But they should not deny that in varying modes and in varying degrees the same Logos has been present in other chosen human beings.[29]

Accordingly, the talk of two natures, one truly human and one truly divine, can be understood as a logical implication of any kind of mediation of the divine. The medium is human or created or finite, but the mediated is nothing less than the infinite divine reality. And since the mode of mediation is in each case a finite one there is space for many finite mediations and mediators of the one infinite transcendent reality. If incarnational language is understood along these lines it too is no barrier in our move beyond tolerance towards a genuine appreciation of the signs of God's presence in other religious traditions.

Let me finish with a final clarifying remark. I do not want to say that religious tolerance is outdated or no longer necessary. There will always be some forms of religious beliefs and practices which even religious pluralists cannot approve of, and of course there will presumably always be religious people who cannot approve of religious pluralism. Therefore religious tolerance and its justifications still remain very important. What I want to say is, that there are cases in which tolerance is not enough and does not fit, cases in which we have no reason to tolerate other religions, but every reason to appreciate or, better, to praise the divine presence mirrored in them, and that there are no insurmountable barriers that could prevent us as Christians from making such a move beyond tolerance.

[29] John Macquarrie, *The Mediators: Nine Stars in the Human Sky* (London: SCM, 1995), p. 149.

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