

Reconciling Differences

Introduction

I begin with two observations: there are various types of differences, and some cannot be reconciled, nor should they be. I shall not speak tonight about family feuds or about disagreements with one's neighbour or at work. I mentioned something about them last week. Rather, I would like to take this opportunity of examining notions of tolerance and commitment especially in a religious context.

The abuse of an attitude often lets us see more clearly its defining characteristics. A religious person, e.g., tends to be superstitious, while a logician inclines to scepticism. What about tolerance, that supreme virtue of our society? What happens to it if you push it? Does it have negative side? A moment's thought reveals that too much tolerance tends to become indifference. We're all tolerant of things that don't concern us. I am willing to grant Lapplanders complete freedom in their burial customs because I couldn't care less what they do. For all I know, they may dismember the corpse and bury the parts at the four corners of the church or the town. I am absolutely tolerant about this matter because I'm completely indifferent. Not many of us, however, would want to call my act virtuous.

The opposite of tolerance is commitment, and we see that in its extreme form it becomes, precisely, intolerance. The more I value something the less willing I am to tolerate its opposite. The term "male chauvinist pig," for example, is not the comment of someone who is willing to tolerate the privileged place in societies that men have enjoyed, past or present.

1. The Christian Commitment to Jesus Christ

a. the fact

As Christians we have a *commitment* to Jesus Christ as "the way, the truth and the life." This biblical phrase was the keynote of the declaration *Dominus Iesus* issued in 2000 under the aegis of the then Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith:

As a remedy for this relativistic mentality, which is becoming ever more common, it is necessary above all to reassert the definitive and complete

character of the revelation of Jesus Christ. In fact, it must be firmly believed that, in the mystery of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God, who is “the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14.6), the full revelation of divine truth is given.

There is nothing novel or strange in this statement, and the document goes on to provide biblical witness to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ:

“No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him” (Mt 11.27); “No one has ever seen God; God the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has revealed him” (Jn 1.18); “For in Christ the whole fullness of divinity dwells in bodily form” (Col 2.9-10).¹

Similarly, when Peter was challenged for preaching the Gospel he replied: “And there is salvation in no one else [but Jesus], for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”² Equally powerful is Saint Paul’s statement in Philippians: “At the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is LORD, to the glory of God the Father.”³

b. the critique

This datum of Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium, obvious as it may seem, has eluded the understanding of liberal critics of the Church. I have in mind one particular instance, an article published a while ago in the *New Yorker* magazine by Peter J. Boyer.⁴ Boyer was “dismayed by the publication, in 2000, of *Dominus Iesus*,” the Church’s declaration that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation. As further confirmation of the Church’s intolerant narrowness Boyer cites John Paul II’s 1990 encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*, which “warned against the ‘incorrect theological perspectives’ that led to the idea that ‘one religion is as good as another.’” Boyer continues:

¹ No. 5.

² Acts 4.12.

³ 2.10-11.

⁴ Peter J. Boyer, “A Hard Faith: Pope Benedict XVI Confronts America,” *New Yorker*, 16 May, 2005, 54-65.

It was this fundamentalism [a loaded term] of John Paul that Cardinal Ratzinger was defending in his instantly famous [i.e., infamous] homily at the Mass for the election of a new Pope, on April 18th. “We are moving toward a dictatorship of relativism,” he said, “which does not recognize anything as certain and which has as its highest goal one’s own ego and one’s own desires.”

3. *Having a Worldview*

It is a good indication of the ignorance about religion in secular America that the *New Yorker*, a magazine that presents itself as the epitome of sophistication, could print this absurdly obtuse article. Less obvious, perhaps, is the origin of the absurdity, *viz.*, confusion about the meaning of tolerance. Boyer, oblivious to the fact that everyone has a point of view, a worldview to which he is committed, is equally unaware of the implication of this fact: in that I am committed to a particular worldview, I say and must say “You’re wrong” to anyone who has a different worldview. This point is worth exploring. Consider, for instance, an atheist. He is convinced, committed to the view that there is no God. Hence he will necessarily say to someone like me, “You’re wrong.” The same holds true for an agnostic, who is certain that no one can be certain whether or not God exists. Confronted with a believer or with an atheist, he will say, “You’re both wrong to think that you can be sure, one way or the other, about the existence of God.” Even a relativist such as Boyer who seems to be the epitome of tolerance in maintaining that all religions are equal, will tell me in no uncertain terms that I am wrong to say that Catholicism has the fullness of truth, and that other religions are valid insofar as they agree with Catholicism; i.e.,—to quote again from *Dominus Iesus*:

In considering the values which these religions witness to and offer humanity, with an open and positive approach, the Second Vatican Council’s Declaration on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions states: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and teachings, which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men” (*Nostra aetate*, 2).⁵

⁵ No. 8.

Thus, the relativist, like the agnostic, the atheist or the theist, will say to someone, “You are wrong.” To do so, whatever Boyer may think, is not intolerance; it is simple fact, and he is himself an instance of what I am saying. Because of his particular worldview, he can criticize the stance of Pope John Paul II simply because it is different from his—which is, of course, the true one:

Beginning with this letter to the Church [the encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* in 1979], and developed through a vast body of writing and preaching, Wojtyla’s bold [*sic*] proposal for the world was that there is one abiding Truth, and in it resides the most promising hope for humankind.

We see, then, that even the most liberal thinker has his point of view and, as a necessary consequence, will be able to point out errors in opposing worldviews: “You’re wrong!” Is this intolerance? Not necessarily. It can be simply commitment to a philosophy of life, unavoidable whether one acknowledges it or not. Even the pragmatist, who has no time to theorize about the world in the rush to get things done, has a worldview, which one could piece together easily from seeing him in action over a day or two.

4. *What is Intolerance?*

a. definition

What, then, is intolerance? Intolerance is not allowing another person to draw his own conclusions about reality. Hence, I can be a conservative and tolerant if I do not impose my views on another person, just as I can be liberal and intolerantly require everyone else to be as liberal as I am.

b. intolerance versus tolerance

I ran across a perfect illustration of the illiberal liberal in the letterbox of *Time Magazine*:

The Rev. Mr. Ratzinger is welcome to be part of Christian conversation but not welcome to jeopardize the universal nature of the church [April 14]. His sectarian pronouncement relegating hundred of millions of Christians to lesser or no standing in Christ’s church is vanity. His continuing support of tired notions like an all-male clergy, no “artificial” birth control and his community’s ownership of the Holy Communion identifies him as one more religious zealot whose myopia compromises the body of Christ. The church suffers because

of him. Out of that suffering may come a renewal of open hearts and minds. Let us pray.

Richard L. Christensen,
Faith Lutheran Church,
BELLINGHAM, WASH.⁶

In other words the Pope is wrong because he disagrees with Mr. Christensen, who will not tolerate a view different from his own; so much for “open hearts.” Boyer, rather obviously, is another instance of intolerance even as he criticizes the intolerance of Rome: both he and Christensen will not allow an interpretation of religion in general, or of Christianity (and within it of Catholicism) in particular, that disagrees with theirs. But there is more. To hold that all religions are equal or that they are “relatively true” is really to say that they are all false, in that none of them can command the exclusive allegiance that is implicit in their several claims to teach a truth revealed by God. Jews, accordingly, are wrong to describe themselves as the chosen people; and Moslems are equally wrong in their conviction that Mohammad received the final and definitive revelation of God from the Archangel Gabriel; Hindus and Buddhists are also in error, the former in accepting a complicated system of avatars and the latter in classifying as unreal all experience, even the experience of the self. Buddhism, however, in its tolerance of multiple approaches to transcendence is for liberals a special case, but it is really no more tolerant of Christianity in saying that Jesus is a Buddha than Christianity is of it in saying that the Buddhist’s agnosticism is the logical consequence of man’s reason bereft of divine revelation. All the Buddhist is doing is making Christians into Buddhists, just as Christians see in Buddhism an unfulfilled quest for Christian truth.⁷ In a discussion of scientific theology, the then Cardinal Ratzinger makes a similar observation regarding Hinduism:

Hinduism, for instance, preserves very impressive myths about the descent of the god Krishna. But because, in the last analysis, they are for it only images of the infinite that can never be confined in words, these histories can be extended, rewritten, enlarged by borrowings and

⁶ “The Nature of the Church” Letter to the Editor, *Time Magazine*, 28 April 2008, p. 9.

⁷ It’s no wonder, though, that Buddhism appeals to modern secularism, which because of its own version of religious agnosticism resents the Church’s exclusive allegiance to Christ. In the words of G.K. Chesterton, “Students of popular science . . . are always insisting that Christianity and Buddhism are very much alike, especially Buddhism” *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco, 1986), p. 334.

varied in a number of other ways; there is, therefore, no problem about adopting the history of Jesus Christ as one of the descents of Krishna. Christian faith, on the other hand, holds firmly that, in Jesus God really came into the world in a way that is historical, not symbolical. . . . For the Christian, Krishna is a dramatic symbol of Christ, who is reality, and this relationship is not reversible.⁸

5. *Limits of Tolerance*

Is the Pope also intolerant? Yes, in that he will not allow Catholics to profess doctrines that are incompatible with the faith, but no, in that he does not force anyone to become—or remain—a Catholic. We come, logically, to the final characteristic of liberalism in this brief discussion of tolerance and commitment. Northrop Frye, a well-known literary critic of a generation ago, who taught, incidentally, at Victoria College in the University of Toronto, expressed it succinctly: “Society is never tolerant about anything it attaches real importance to.”⁹ Let me list a few of the shibboleths of Canada today: racism, feminism, “a woman’s right to choose,” homosexuality. Think of what has happened in the United States a couple of years ago to President Lawrence Summers of Harvard for a simple question about gender differences: he had to resign. In 1999, David Howard, aide to Mayor Anthony Williams of Washington, lost his job for having uttered the word “niggardly”¹⁰ in a private staff meeting. And it is not only in America that this intolerance is exercised. Our own Father de Valk, who edits *Catholic Insight*, has been called before the Human Rights Commission for nothing more than printing in his magazine the Church’s teaching about homosexuality.

6. *The Quarrel is with Religion Itself*

How does this apply to Boyer & Co.? In the last analysis they are, to say the least, indifferent to religion; it’s not really important because it’s not really true. At best, it’s useful in furthering some social cause—the “opiate of the masses” as someone once said; at worst, as expounded by John Paul II or Benedict XVI, it is pernicious. Cardinal Newman captured the essence of their irreligion when, as Mr. Newman, an Anglican minister, 170 years ago

⁸ *Principles of Catholic Theology*, M.F. McCarthy, trans. (San Francisco, 1987), p. 326.

⁹ *The Great Code* (Toronto, 1982), p. 94.

¹⁰ The word “niggardly,” which means “stingy” (OED), has no racial connotations.

he preached one of his most eloquent sermons, “The Strictness of the Law of Christ”:¹¹

The state of the multitude of men is this,—their real quarrel with religion, if they know themselves, is not that it is strict, or engrossing, or imperative, not that it goes too far, but that it is religion. It is religion itself which we all by nature dislike, not the excess merely. Nature tends towards the earth and God is in heaven.

He continues with a brilliant metaphor:

If I want to travel north, and all the roads are cut to the east, of course I shall complain of the roads. I shall find nothing but obstacles; I shall have to surmount walls, and cross rivers, and go round about, and after all fail of my end. Such is the conduct of those who are not bold enough to give up a profession of religion, yet wish to serve the world. They try to reach Babylon by roads which run to Mount Sion.

C.S. Lewis provides a clever parallel to illustrate the religious indifference that would describe itself as tolerance:

. . . the reason we do not execute witches is that we do not believe there are such things. . . . It may be a great advance in knowledge not to believe in witches: there is no moral advance in not executing them when you do not think they are there. You would not call a man humane for ceasing to set mousetraps if he did so because he believed there were no mice in the house.¹²

Conclusion: Pope Benedict

The best refutation of Boyer’s article can be found in the writings of Benedict XVI himself, a profound thinker enriching every topic he touches and utterly unrecognizable in the devious opportunist described in the New Yorker. In *Principles of Catholic Theology* (1982), he identified the fundamental error in the liberal re-invention of Catholicism: it is an artificial construct that, in its break with historical Christianity, implicitly denies revelation itself.

¹¹ John Henry Newman, “The Strictness of the Law of Christ,” *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1997), 733-43.

¹² *Mere Christianity* (London, 1955), pp. 24-25.

It is absurd to seek to destroy the bearer of tradition as such, to undertake an ecclesiastical space flight with no ground station, to attempt to produce a new and purer Christianity in the test tube of the mere intellect: a Church that is nothing but a manager is nothing at all; she is no longer tradition, and, in an intellect that knows no tradition, she becomes pure nothingness, a monster of meaninglessness.¹³

Revelation, as the content of tradition, is ultimately a person, Jesus Christ, who reveals man to himself. For Benedict XVI, therefore, an abandonment of Catholic truth is a form of slavery in a foolish, self-defeating attempt “to emancipate oneself from what is human.”¹⁴ Faith, on the other hand, provides access to the totality of reality by bestowing meaning for man’s actions at both the intellectual and the emotional levels. The Holy Father’s description of faith presents it as consisting of a loving allegiance to Jesus Christ:

For anyone who recognizes the Christ in Jesus, and only in him, . . . anyone who grasps the total oneness of person and of work as the decisive factor, has abandoned any antithesis between faith and love; he has combined both in one and made their mutual separation unthinkable.¹⁵

Such is the thought of the theologian and supreme pontiff that journalists and malcontents would dismiss in a few hasty slogans, demolishing a straw man in their desire to create a novel form of Christianity without content or shape.

¹³ *Principles*, p. 101.

¹⁴ *Principles*, p. 94.

¹⁵ *Introduction to Christianity*, J.R. Foster, trans. (New York, 1969), p. 153.