

# THE ALTERNATIVE

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Dear Reader.

This issue deals with a topic that has been increasingly important during the last few decades: tolerance. The question of what to make of tolerance is not an intramural topic of concern only to religionists. I agree with Hans Kung who has said, **A**here will be no peace in the world without peace among the religions, there will be no peace among the religions without dialogue, and no dialogue without emphasis on a common ethic. **@**

Kung's first phrase states his fundamental conviction: no peace among religions, no peace in the world. His next two phrases suggest a program or strategy. No peace among religions without dialogue is a statement of educational principle. His third phrase is problematic: no dialogue without emphasis on a common ethic. That the ethical dimension is not to be neglected in religious dialogue is a valuable reminder. But I have some hesitation in endorsing Kung's common ethic. He seems to think that a common ethic is available and can be stated. I think that whatever our ethical agreements may be, they will take a while to emerge and may never be fully articulated in a code of conduct.

A more modest ambition is stated in Madeleine Albright's new book, The Mighty and the Almighty. She says that she only gradually came to see the need to understand differences of religion in international politics. Her motto became **A**earn a great deal about your own faith, and learn enough about the other faith to have respect for it. **@** She notes that **A**s a leader, you have to have the ability to assimilate new information and understand that there might be a different view. **@**She is especially concerned with learning more about Islam which, of course, is the centerpiece of people's concern in this country for religious tolerance. The United States remains shockingly ignorant of Islam, both its long history and its shape in various cultures today. The former competition between the Soviet Union and the United States has been replaced by a standoff between a form of Christianity that dominates United States foreign policy and a form of Islam that feeds animosity in eastern Asia.

Each of the three essays in this issue of the Newsletter provides background for the emergence of religious tolerance as a central concern in today's world. Each is also concerned with something not always admitted when tolerance is celebrated, namely, that tolerance always has a limit. Every group considers some things intolerable, but who sets that line for the world as a whole?

## TOLERANCE AND THE AMBIGUITY OF RELIGION

By Gabriel Moran

Here is my proposal for looking at the history of tolerance: the first stage was a grudging acknowledgment that there is a plurality of religions. The issue was political and religious but not educational. A second stage attempted to level or eliminate religion with politics and education. A third stage, not well represented in the past but sorely needed for the present and the future, would be a tolerance that includes both religion and education.

The first stage I refer to began in the wake of the sixteenth-century reformation in Christianity. Our modern meaning of religion as the name of diverse institutions was coined in the late sixteenth century. The first two religions, one could say, were called Catholic and Protestant. Those two quickly disappeared into diverse parts of one religion called Christianity. Nevertheless, the acknowledgment that Catholics and Protestants had a share in religion was a start in what came to be called religious toleration. The English word toleration has a less positive connotation than tolerance but that is not to belittle the early advocates of toleration. We have to thank the Netherlands and England for proposing that people with a different religion should be allowed not only to live but to practice their own religion.

The medieval church had treated heretics with brutal repression. The churches of the Reformation did not do much better until Catholics and Protestants reached a standoff in several countries. Voltaire was unfortunately accurate in saying that of all the religions, the Christian is undoubtedly that which should instill the greatest toleration, although so far the Christians have been the most intolerant of all men. When the shift toward toleration occurred, the main motivation was political expediency, although one should not exclude genuine religious motives on the part of some people.

In the English speaking world, the 1689 Act of Toleration legally established the rights of religious minorities to their own form of religious worship. John Locke at the same time supported this argument for freedom of religion in his *Letter of Toleration*. However, like John Milton, Locke did not think such freedom should extend to Roman Catholics. It is to the credit of Protestant Christians that they first saw the need for religious toleration; it is due to their limitations that they did not see beyond their own form of Christianity.

The eighteenth-century French *philosophes* in some ways continued the trend while at the same time they reversed the basis of the trend. Skepticism, instead of faith, became the motive for tolerance. What came to be the dominant meaning of tolerance in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was born of the call to replace religion with education. In this new world, people were to be respected simply because they were human. It did not matter what was the color of their skin or the truth of their creeds. Eventually, the superstitions of religion would disappear and tolerance would come fully into its own. For Voltaire, with the decline in the strength of religious creeds, there will follow a concomitant decline in human hatred....Indifference will breed tolerance.

Voltaire's prediction has proved to be faulty. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who broke with Voltaire and Diderot over the issue of religion, has proved to be the more insightful prophet. In Rousseau's ideal state, Christianity would continue as a private taste. Social cohesion would be achieved with a civil religion in which the nation demands absolute loyalty. The only virtue needed would be tolerance. Having agreed to a social contract, a person's only vice would be intolerance, punishable by death.

This notion of liberty and tolerance has a distinguished intellectual history. Even conservative critics don't really wish to return to the world before 1789. But there have always been people who, while sympathetic to liberty and equality, worry about the erosion of a tolerance built on skepticism. Alexis de Tocqueville, a supporter of the American experiment in the United States, thought that individualism (a word he coined to describe the United States) might subvert its own democratic basis. When Zhou Enlai was asked in the 1960s whether the French Revolution had been a success, he replied: "I'm sorry. It's too early to tell."

That comment leads to the third kind of tolerance that draws upon the previous two: a tolerance that is based upon both religion and education. Instead of downplaying or trying to eliminate religious belief, it would begin by accepting its existence. Humans are believing animals and religion shows no sign of disappearing. Education has to provide ways for differing religious beliefs, as well as non-religious beliefs, to co-exist on one earth. However unlikely it may seem to some people, religious beliefs could be a support to tolerance. As some seventeenth-century writers may have sensed without carrying the sentiment to a logical conclusion, in order that one may be tolerant in the full sense of the word, he must realize on the basis of his own experience what it means to have a conviction and cherish it.

The problem with that principle in the past was that there was very little dialogue between religions, no urgency to try to understand another's religious beliefs. It seemed neither necessary nor practically possible to engage the complexity of another's religion. Understanding and practicing one's own religion was challenge enough. The principle of let each man mind his own business, a tolerance based on religious ignorance and political equality, seemed good enough. For the last half century or so, it has not been good enough but we have a lag in our educational efforts. The possibility and the difficulty of a tolerance which includes both religion and education is captured in the word tradition. Tradition appears to many people as the main obstacle to tolerance, dialogue and progress. It is often invoked that way. However, tradition can be the chief support for the religious reformer, a source for looking at things in a new way without rejecting the past.

Tradition begins as a verb, the act of handing on. It can include writing but also connotes more: the oral, aural and tactile. There is a tendency in human life, exacerbated in the English language, for verbs to become nouns. That happens with the word faith, the act of believing in. This tendency has especially affected tradition.

which becomes equated with things left by tradition rather than the continuing process of handing on. Martin Luther was careful to distinguish between misguided accretions in Christian history that were called traditions and the living process of tradition. As the Lutheran historian Jaroslav Pelikan phrases it, **T**raditionalism is the dead religion of living people; tradition is the living religion of dead people. **O**r as H.G. Gadamer paradoxically states, **T**radition exists only in constantly become other than it is. **O**

Education in a tradition cannot be done wholly in a classroom. One has to be apprenticed into the practices of a tradition. That stubborn fact presents an almost insuperable obstacle to an outsider's being able to understand the tradition. That does not mean it is not worth trying but one should be modest about claiming to understand someone else's tradition. It is almost impossible to simply step outside of one's own tradition. Some people do gradually shed their upbringing, but quick conversions often leave the converted with the same obsessions, except now they are pounding on the wall from the outside instead of the inside. Better to examine one's prejudices and decide which ones are worth keeping.

Reform of traditions is carried out mainly by the insider who knows not only what to reform but how to do it. **T**he great advantage of tradition which is as long as that of any of the historic religions is that it gives the chance to appeal to more than one strand in it; it may at times be the reformer's strongest ally. **E**very religious tradition has such disparate strands; the richer the tradition, the closer these strands come to self-contradiction. Quoting a few sentences out of context can be misleading about any tradition. Liberalizing reform has to come from reformers who are deeply not superficially conservative.

In the past, people believed that religious conflicts could be easily solved. If those other people would just stay where they belong, there would be peace. We no longer have the luxury of believing in that illusion. The interaction of religions is now inevitable, and we are probably only at the threshold of how widely and how deeply the exchanges will become in this century.

Most educated people recognize that not everything in their tradition is true, good and final. They are aware that there have to be continuing efforts to improve what the past has given us to work with. Every reform is in the direction of the one true religion but to claim that my tradition has arrived there is not a credible position. People rightly resist what is offered as the alternative to one's own religion as true, which is that all religions are equal. With that premise, we just have to scrape off the words and we find that all religions are basically alike. But the only way that all religious traditions could be equal is if they are equally false, if having scraped off the words what is left are a few generalities discoverable elsewhere.

The real alternative is for religious people to stand by the truth as they know it and be willing to listen to people who have a different experience of the world. The first aim of religious dialogue is to find places within each tradition where people can meet one

another in mutual respect. One cannot deny, however, that religious dialogue is a minefield of possible misunderstandings. Religious traditions offer a cornucopia of possibilities for reform and transformation. They are also a storehouse of slights, grudges, misunderstandings and animosities. Academic announcements of agreement are suspect without gestures of accord in the non-schooling parts of education. Social, cultural and political interactions need to provide a context for linguistic interpretations in the classroom.

Religious traditions do not confront one another as equals. Which is the younger and which is the older is an especially important issue when they are within the same family. Some of the dynamics in a Christian-Jewish dialogue are reversed in a Christian-Muslim dialogue. The younger tradition has to be careful of not seeming to claim that it has taken the best of the older tradition and improved on it. Where something universal is at stake, the younger tradition may claim a legitimate share but not claim ownership. If Jewish tradition uses **A** covenant as a way to point to the divine-human bond, then Christians, Muslims, and others have a right to stake a share in that term. The claim is not to a Christian covenant as opposed to a Jewish covenant but to a Christian interpretation of the meaning of covenant.

Another imbalance in religious dialogue is size, and the oppression that minority status usually entails. A religious tradition with hundreds of millions of followers has to engage in dialogue with self-imposed restraints; a small group just trying to be heard at all can act differently. Large and powerful institutions can cause havoc simply by making a quick turn in a crowded space. Gestures intended to be friendly can be experienced as co-opting or assimilative. I agree with John Cobb that **A**ue openness to other traditions will require that we make their history our own. **I** would add that this appropriating of history must be done very carefully with recognition that it might be misunderstood. Cobb uses as an example that **A**ve Christians will view Muhammad as our prophet as well. **T**hat possibility could be an interesting topic of conversation between Muslims and Christians but probably not something that Christians should immediately assert. I see no problem in a Christian affirming Muhammad as a prophet. For the Christian tradition to say he is **A**ur prophet as well **c**ould be a presumptuous appropriation.

Wouldn't it be better to get rid of the paradoxical logic of religious traditions and lay out general propositions? Instead of saying **A** Christ is the way of salvation **o**r **A** Only a true Muslim is saved, **w**hy not say **A**ll good people go to heaven. **T**he answer seems to be that human beings are located in space and time, speaking different languages; they live in the particular not the general. A language that seeks to be all-encompassing risks being vacuous. Great works of religion, like great works of art, confront us with the stubbornly real and force us to think about what is universally true about the human condition. Whatever the failures of ancient traditions, they may be worth the effort to reform them. Twentieth-century attempts to replace religion - Nazism, Fascism, Communism, Capitalism- have not worked out very well.

TOLERANCE AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

By Peter Steinfels

The common note sounded in welcoming the Gospel of Judas, the recovered second-century text and justifying the surrounding hoopla was that it demonstrated the diversity of early Christianity. Demonstrating the diversity, it was assumed, was not just a fact, it was a good thing. It was a good thing because it opened new possibilities of what could be altered or legitimated within contemporary Christianity. The passion for diversity cannot be understood without noting what these scholars pose as the contrasting reality. For them the opposite of diverse is monolithic.

Monolithic, of course, implies religious authorities enforcing the party line, primarily the heresy hunters of early Christianity, as they are branded by scholars and maybe the Sunday school teacher of today. Terry Garcia, a vice president at National Geographic, implied as much when he extolled the Judas Gospel project as showing that things are a lot more complex than what you were once taught in Sunday school. The unstated equation often goes something like this: diversity (and heresy) good; monolithic (and Sunday school) bad.

Would it then be another, presumably acceptable heresy, to suggest that religious diversity is not necessarily good in itself, nor for that matter is heresy? The white racist Christian Identity movement, for example, is a heresy. Even if the diversity of Christianity were diminished by the disappearance of its exponents like the Aryan Nations, most Christians (one hopes) and scholars would count this a very good thing.

What is true about Christianity can be said about religions generally. The religious belief that cosmic order rests on regularly ripping out the heart of virgins has disappeared (again one hopes), and it is hard to imagine anyone regretting that particular loss of religious diversity.

Forty years ago, the Second Vatican Council effectively declared it heretical to believe and teach that Jews shared in some sort of collective responsibility for the death of Jesus. Should the church leaders who solemnly made that declaration be labeled heresy hunters?

The question of diversity is also central to what may be the most important debate in the world today, that between different understandings of Islam. Muslims opposed to understandings of Islam as monolithic, self-contained and defined by unyielding rules and sharp dichotomies, naturally emphasize their faith's rich diversity of thought and practice over many centuries and cultures. That is the basis on which many of them advocate an Islam diverse, complex and flexible enough to find common ground with modernity or democracy. One doubts that they worry that the disappearance of authoritarian and violence-prone versions of Islam would be a crime against diversity.

The point may be obvious but it often gets obscured in contemporary scholarly discussions of religion. Diversity may be a good in itself - up to a point. Ultimately, however, it cannot be evaluated without regard to other values. Does diversity (or

heresy) serve or damage generosity, compassion, justice or reconciliation?

To entertain reservations about diversity as an unexamined catchword should not lead to exaggerations in the opposite extreme. Recognizing limits to the benefits of religious diversity certainly does not mean defending monolithic religion. And in cases where diverse expressions of a religious tradition or of religion in general hardly deserve celebration, recovering knowledge of them does enlarge one's sense of religion's mixed potential, for evil as well as for good.

In some circumstances, highlighting diversity in religion past or present can be an effective challenge to a monolithic fundamentalism. In other circumstances, highlighting diversity is far less likely to explode a monolithic fundamentalism, which is well-equipped to ignore intellectual challenges, than to fragment nonfundamentalist belief, precisely because of its openness to new knowledge. The dynamics of religious discussion, discovery and change are complex and often unpredictable.

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## TOLERANCE AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

By Perez Zagorin

In December of 1965, the Second Vatican Council passed the Declaration on Religious Freedom by an overwhelming majority. Of all the Council's documents, this was the only one addressed to the entire world and all faiths. After referring to the increasing contemporary consciousness of the dignity of the human person and to the church's scrutiny of its tradition in order to draw new things in harmony with the old, it stated that **A**ne human person has a right to religious freedom.@

In defining this freedom it asserted that **A**ll men are to be immune from coercion@by individuals, social groups, or **A**ny human power@so that **A**n matters religious no one is forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs. Nor is anyone to be restrained from acting in accordance with his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits.@

It perceived the foundation of this right in **A**ne very dignity of the human person@as known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself.@The one limit the Declaration placed on the free exercise of religion was@ne just requirement of public order.@In the case of particular countries that recognized a state religion, it pointed out the imperative obligation to secure all citizens and other religious bodies in their right to religious freedom.

Looking at religious freedom in the light of revelation, it affirmed that God created man to enjoy freedom and that Christ and the apostles had appealed only to conscience, never using force to compel belief. It took note of the importance of the rights of the Catholic church in a pluralistic society, emphasizing the church's own need of freedom

to perform its spiritual mission. The Declaration also acknowledged that **A**n the vicissitudes of history **@**he church had acted at times and in ways **A**hich were less in accord with the gospel and even opposed to it. **@**In its conclusion, finally, it stressed the necessity of universal religious freedom **@**n the present condition of the human family, **@**n which the different nations, cultures and religions of the world were coming together in closer relationships. **@**

The Catholic theologian John Courtney Murray said of this document that **A**n all honesty it must be admitted **@**hat the church was **A**ate in acknowledging the validity of the principle of religious freedom. **@**Indeed it was very late. Moreover the document was far from confronting with complete candor the Catholic church's long history of cruel intolerance and far from expressing any contrition or apology for its record of religious persecution.

In spite of these faults, the Declaration on Religious Freedom was an accomplishment of world importance. It signified a complete reversal of the Catholic church's former inimical attitude to toleration and announced its adherence to religious freedom as a universal principle and contemporary obligation and necessity.

The ideas of toleration and religious freedom are ultimately not separable. Wherever tolerance has been recognized as more than a temporary expedient, wherever it has been advocated for religious, moral, and humanitarian reasons, it has also had a relation to and tended to develop in the direction of religious freedom. The succession of thinkers and publicists who conceived and worked out the theory of toleration in early modern Europe all had a concept of religious freedom in their minds as they strove to deliver Christian dissenters from persecution at the hands of the representatives of Catholic and Protestant state churches.

The poet Goethe once wrote, **A**What you have inherited from your fathers/You must work on that you may possess it. **@**During the twentieth century religious freedom and pluralism became largely a reality in Western society and inseparable from political and other freedoms. We in the Western world, if we are at all conscious of the long hard struggle that lies behind the achievement of our religious and other freedoms, can never permit ourselves to take them for granted and must always strive to protect them.

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