

Reflections on Intolerance in a Modern, Shrinking, and Pluralistic World

ROGER HAIGHT, S.J.

Reflection on tolerance and intolerance in our modern pluralistic world is accompanied by dismay at how our situation resists clear answers. Tolerance, an ability to permit, put up with, allow, and not contradict, prohibit, or resist beliefs and practices other than our own, is a virtue. Intolerance, then, is a vice because it presupposes that an unwillingness to accept, allow, bear with or grant equal rights to others is directed toward something that deserves respect. For example, a group is intolerant if it excludes people because of race; but we don't call a society intolerant for not accepting murder. But who decides what is tolerable in a rapidly changing world? Where could we, and where should we be more accepting when both the virtue and the vice admit degrees of more and less, as well as fuzzy boundaries? For example, if it is becoming clearer that the natural religious condition of the world is pluralistic, should we not rejoice in the diversity of religions rather than merely tolerate it? Suddenly mere toleration begins to appear as morally wanting.

Our moral quandary, therefore, has to be set in a context of pluralism, which I define as differences that are held together or that exist within a common field so that they interact: they encounter each other. For example, it used to be that religions for the most part were confined to different regions or cultures and did not confront each other on a daily basis. Today they live together in great metropolises and interchange becomes constant, complex, and delicate. Responses to issues that seem obvious require subtle reflection. Intolerance divides religions and Christian churches; it subsists in the relation between religion and unbelief, and religion and science; it is found in the academy, professions, and society at large. The following topics merely scratch the surface of deep and far-ranging moral attitudes.

Religious Intolerance Today

Some cultures define themselves over against others; who they are includes hatred of other groups. I want to deal with behavior that is intentional rather than culturally engrained.

The question cannot be addressed naively because it is difficult to determine when hostility toward others is purely religious or deliberately intolerant. For example, does what looks like hostility to another religion mask reaction to an identifiable group that seeks or possesses power in a society? Is anti-Semitism religiously motivated? Religion goes far in defining identity, but intolerance may be resisting a social control that will affect my group. For example, will toleration of an expanding group of Muslims in a region of North Africa result in an imposition of Muslim law on my family? In this case, the religious and the social are intertwined. In the United States, the relevance of religion to party politics has been mitigated by the privatization of religious commitment. In many spheres, including the political, one's religious commitment goes unattended

even though sociologists can discover trends attached to different religious groups. Privatization has helped to neutralize religious intolerance even though theologians insist that Christian faith has to be played out in social behavior.

The most fundamental expressions of religious intolerance occur when religious belonging most fully defines a group's identity, and forces outside itself then challenge that identity. This is a group phenomenon. For example, an Israeli and a Palestinian Muslim may be good friends and their families may socialize together. But isolated individual cases do not determine group responses, and these individuals will naturally align themselves with corporate identity policies and not vote against their group's self-interest. It is difficult to sort out personal and institutional intolerance.

Does Religion Produce Intolerance?

Jon Sobrino has responded forcefully to the charge that religion causes or promotes division and conflict: "We do not challenge the thesis that religions can generate and have generated fanaticism and violence, but . . . a) religion contains self-correcting elements to overcome fanaticism and violence; b) violence is a consequence of all idolatry, not only the religious form; c) religion is capable of generating compassion and love."¹ Usually, when religion is included in the definition of warring parties, there are also other factors at work. Any religion that promotes intolerance of other religions discredits itself. Such is the revelation of globalization interdependency.

¹ Jon Sobrino, *Where is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity, and Hope* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 127–28.

The current push of history toward global interconnectedness provides an urgent occasion for the positive essence of each religion to assert itself. The world religions have demonstrated by their longevity that they have something good to communicate to humankind. For a religion to claim to be true and universally relevant implicitly requires that it reach out and affirm the value of all people. Each religion should display the constructive core of its spirituality so that all may appreciate who and what it is. For example, in Christianity, the incarnation that occurred in Jesus does not shed its benefits exclusively on Christians; Jesus is not a possession of Christians. Jesus belongs to humanity as such, and incarnation in him means that God embraces all human beings. Therefore, Jesus as an individual human being has to be understood as a power of reconciliation and not division, as a visitation of divine love inclusive of the enemy and not something that excludes or demotes other people. Interpretations of Jesus that make enemies of people belonging to other religions have missed the point and seriously erred.

I presume other religions may be understood analogously, unless they are local, sectarian, and divisive enterprises. This is why there are countless examples of promoting dialogue and brotherhood among peoples and faiths. But the goal extends beyond building a culture of tolerance, to one in which pluralism will appear to be a positive quality of human history and societies will be enriched by religious difference. We have to try to get beyond mere tolerance and strive to learn from each other. History is moving forward, and I hope for a time when interreligious dialogue will no longer be a strained formality but a spontaneous way of living.

What Happened to Enlightenment?

The so-called Enlightenment was a Western phenomenon, and one cannot presume that every culture or society has had its own period of thoroughgoing critical analysis of the sources of knowledge and value. Moreover, an intellectual elite primarily generated the Enlightenment and was affected by it. The Enlightenment took aim at religious authority, and the churches resisted it largely by becoming more authoritarian.

As Enlightenment gradually filtered down to general culture, many churches continued to resist it, even when they internalized many of its principles. So not everyone in a post-Enlightenment culture in the West is enlightened. For example, in the United States, which was founded on the principles of the Enlightenment, around 40 percent of people today do not believe in evolution. Degrees of general education and many other considerations have to be factored into an assessment of whether a society is enlightened. Like religiously based cultures, many people in the first world have never passed through a salutary self-critical period. Enlightenment is an overvalued social concept.

Can We Satirize Religion Today?

We should try to understand the Charlie Hebdo event, and others like it, in such a way that the reactions all around are understandable. This does not mean morally “justified,” it does mean trying to comprehend the sensibilities that are confronting each other. I will use the distinction between spirituality and religion to make the point. Spirituality refers to the logic of a person’s or a group’s whole life, how they live in the face of what they consider transcendently valuable. Religion is institutionalized spirituality, an organizational form of a faith that is designed to sustain and nurture spirituality.

On the one hand, “Western intellectualism” represents critical questioning of something and satire is one of its most popular forms. Few people used satire to criticize society and church as effectively as Erasmus at the beginning of the sixteenth century with his *In Praise of Folly*. Everything, that is, *everything* was subjected to ridicule. The value of freedom, the autonomy of the people, and the ability to speak back against the structures of authority, are strong values that were being exercised and protected. On the other hand, Erasmus represented internal criticism, the way family members are allowed to lovingly criticize their parents. Change the context to a relationship between a dominating first world and in some respects exploited peoples, and the critique becomes an aggressive attack of an enemy who enjoys an upper hand of power on a weaker victim.

Spirituality, as a sum total of a person’s or group’s fundamental commitment, existentially defines a person’s identity. We are what we do. And religion may define closely one’s spirituality, especially in a pre-enlightenment culture. In the West, there is far more space between people’s spirituality and their religion than there is in Islam. This distinction helps one to understand that what may appear in the West as an acceptable parody of the ardent believer’s religion will appear to Islam as a direct insult of personal and corporate identity. There is no objectivity here; it amounts to *ad hominem* assault.

We are increasingly living in a unified world that contains radical differences in spiritual and religious sentiment. The value of human self-criticism is high, but it is not so absolute that it does not have to attend to the basic identities of people across differences. If these are not sympathetically attended to, satire becomes an attack that will inevitably produce counterattack. All institutions by their nature invite satirical criticism. Yet a cool analytical mindset should be able to recognize that in some cultures there is less space between

personal spirituality and objective religious institution. Without that space, satire is no longer reflective and constructive; it becomes malicious aggression.

The Use of Religion for Political Ends

On the supposition that there is a distinction between human activity and the motivations behind it, there is no doubt that if politicians and social activists think they can gather momentum by appealing to religious sensibilities, they will seize it. Sometimes it may be legitimate: the Catholic Church opposes free access to abortion not because it curtails human choices, but because it is a morally wrong choice and will diminish the moral sensibility of the nation to the value of human life. But frequently, a direct or implicit appeal to religion in matters of the common good tries to gain support for a policy that lacks a coherent intrinsic rationale and uses religion either negatively (against other groups) or positively (by unwarranted inference) to gain support where it would not otherwise be given. For example, a political party appeals to one group in society by evoking fear or hatred of another group or religion. Or, again, whether or not a given policy seems coherent, it is sold on the basis of it fostering the agenda of this or that religion. This happens often because the people who resort to it say: “we have nothing to lose” and “it usually works.”

There is no doubt that politics is utilitarian and often surrenders morals to objectives. But I do not necessarily believe that religious intolerance is increasing in principle even though it may be increasingly apparent. I want to think that changing conditions of our common existence as a species is expanding human relationships in a revolutionary way. Human cultures, societies, and groups are being thrown together, and awareness of the effects of this development is growing. External events and new relationships

are affecting everyone's way of life, and people are reacting. New corporate relationships are testing the human capacity of tolerance in dramatic ways. Tolerance has to be learned; it is usually learned slowly. And tolerance is merely a first step in a longer process aimed at welcoming difference. I discuss this further on.

Religious and Other Forms of Intolerance

Does religious intolerance lead to other forms of intolerance? This question can go in several different directions. I will concede that religious experience can become so intense that it begins to close in on itself rather than open the human spirit out to the world. This has happened at various times in the history of Christianity, and there are clear examples during the period of the Reformation when conservative and perfectionist groups drew back from both the Catholic and Protestant movements to form highly motivated and exclusive churches focused on moral discipline.

On one side, these churches, usually congregationalist in polity, helped to force recognition of a separation of church and state; on another side, in various degrees they set themselves apart from the mechanisms of Christian and worldly society. Their exclusive evangelical outlook was and today still is not open to a variety of secular values, let alone the spiritualities and institutions of other religions. These narrowly focused churches transfer their negative attitudes to an ever-expanding number of objects.

Although it oversimplifies things, a good way of appreciating such an "intolerant" Christianity would be to draw a sharp contrast with an opposing interpretation. I expect that other religions have versions of this same polarity. In one view of Christian faith, God's grace mediated to us in Jesus Christ is so intensely and comprehensively experienced that all other candidates for a total commitment of one's life are considered rivals and regarded with

suspicion, if not rejection. In another view of Christian faith, in stark contrast to the former, Jesus Christ is an incarnation of God in history that testifies to God's acceptance and approbation of the whole of creation. The Christian re-appropriates the words from the story of creation where "God saw everything that God had made, and behold, it was very good" (Gen 1:31).

Spirituality Can Be Just as Intolerant as Religion

When spirituality is understood as the logic of the whole life of a person or group, especially as centered by a commanding value, one can see that it is distinct from the social phenomenon of organized religion. I believe that the saying, common in the United States, that "I am spiritual, but not religious," stems from churches failing to engage the deep sources of a people's spirituality and offering religious truths that do not connect. But this does not mean that spirituality is necessarily open and tolerant. Some intellectual forms of spirituality, including Christian spirituality, look down on others. Think of the *illuminati* who despise popular religious practice as superstition. Spiritualities with a strong sense of privilege may become the source of intolerance: like a religious spirituality that is narrow, suspicious of others, and bigoted. The turn to spirituality does not exempt it from the dangers of intolerance.

But the danger is rooted in the way the content of faith is appropriated or the subject matter of the spirituality and not in "spirituality per se." The reason for this is that everyone has a spirituality; everyone lives by some faith; unlike religion, spirituality is a universal anthropological structure. Even the atheist lives by a spiritual commitment. A balanced spirituality, therefore, would be one that is open to others and only judgmental against other spiritualities that lead to injury of human beings and impede human

flourishing. But that discernment is not always easy, and in every case it is conditioned by a historical set of particular circumstances.

Intolerance between Faith and Science Is a Mistake

This issue highlights the incommensurability of the two different spheres of science and religion even when they interact. On the popular level, the relationship frequently breeds trenchant disdain for the other kind of knowledge: scientists are bigoted attackers of religion; religionists are ignorant or naïve believers in a sphere of reality that simply does not exist. This hostility frequently lodges deep down in people's imagination, rendering whatever is proffered on the other side untrustworthy. Scientists attack popular religion; theologians decry the conclusions of science but have no idea of the perspective or method that generated them.

By contrast two words can be introduced to this question that open up a completely different sphere of interchange: “fields” and “dialogue,” as in fields that enter into dialogue. First, theologians and scientists make up the fields. They are professionals; they bear the technical knowledge of their disciplines. Their views consist in more than opinion and hearsay; they bring methodological expertise to the table. Frequently they bear some knowledge of the others' disciplines or spiritualities. Second, these experts enter into dialogue. Dialogue has rules of listening as well as asserting, understanding the others as well as explaining to them, looking for mutual illumination while respecting radically different methods of construing reality. The dialogue between science and religion, which is being pursued across many subfields, is thriving today, and the exchange is one of the most catalytic forces for new theological interpretation.

Globalization of Indifference and Intolerance

Pope Francis has referred to selfishness and indifference on a global scale: those who are more or less wealthy and content are not affected by the suffering of so many peoples around the world. Can we discern an analogous globalization of intolerance?

This question allows me to clarify some things said earlier. Because communication and commerce are tightening the bonds of connectedness and interdependencies between different peoples, what has already happened worldwide in urban centers is happening more generally. New ideas, values, and possibilities now bombard traditional societies and cultures. These cultures have to react, and the first act has to be resistance. The forces from the outside are invasive; they take aim at corporate identity; they disrupt, and they generally cannot be controlled. I do not want to think of this first act of resistance as intolerance. It may certainly become intolerance, but it makes more sense to examine cases one at a time.

It may be impossible to quantify and measure indifference and intolerance on a global scale; the field is too massive and the variables too great. At best we can use exhortatory rhetoric to lesson distrust and increase openness to the other.

When we look at human history as a process that unfolds gradually over time, it will be much more fruitful and profitable for all to envisage ways of softening the blows of globalization. If the values of mutual respect and trust, which in fact do govern most world commerce which in turn cannot exist without them (you get what you pay for), were translatable into world politics, it would temper and maybe even render positive the inevitable tendency of history toward interdependency. The religions have a large responsibility and task to examine the traces of dominance and intolerance in their own organizational forms, especially their theologies, because they help shape fundamental moral dispositions.

They might then begin to envision themselves as mediators of human reconciliation and mutual human flourishing across borders. All the world religions have something to teach all people.

How to Handle Changing Attitudes in a Changing World

As a way of concluding these reflections, I raise the question of how the rapidity of change underlies these issues of tolerance and intolerance. History is moving rapidly, not just in terms of passing events, but also through new learning about our world and ourselves as human beings. We need a framework that will provide a context to gather together and re-situate our traditional beliefs and values. The framework of evolution is a candidate.

Evolution suggests far more than what Darwin meant by the origin of the species. Today it evokes the unimaginable size and history of the cosmos and the temporal development of our planet. We humans have in some respects been reduced in importance; in other respects, we appear to be a kind of apogee of such a colossal project of development that we have grown in stature, and still much more is on the way. Evolution is not quite a new metanarrative, but it provides a framework from science that can be embraced by all religions. Within that framework, an appeal to creation theology (or, in other religions, the foundations of ultimacy in origin, grounding, and destiny) can provide a language in which to articulate common questions and discover points of contact and difference with others.

The grounds of Christian spirituality are faith in a creator God, who is revealed in the ministry of Jesus as the personal loving power that sustains the universe. God's Spirit is at work in it and in us. This vast vision of reality is neither challenged nor diminished by science, but fortified by it. It certainly inspires religious awe. The magnitude of this newly discovered reality gives all the religions a new horizon

within which to situate themselves and consider their relationship with others. We are united as a biological family of human beings in this immense universe; our different revelations and spiritual languages should not be competing with each other; we should be comparing our visions. We should be going far beyond tolerance toward respect for each other and mutual cooperation and exchange.