

The end of tolerance? *Beyond respect, pluralism and democracy*

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Introduction

We are invited to reconsider the concept of tolerance. It is true that in everyday speech, “tolerance” and the family of words associated with it – to tolerate, tolerant, tolerable – have become dull and problematic. Two examples:

- a. The expression “I can tolerate you” has a scent, or rather a bad smell, of condescension. In “I can tolerate you”, we hear by implication, “I accept you, but I don’t like you” or “You can be here in my space, but don’t come too near me.” The problem is that tolerance, in this case, instead of expressing openness, which is good, has become a sign of contempt.
- b. Second example. The expression “I am tolerant” also has a sort of undertone of contempt. “I’m not like those other people, they’re intolerant!” “I’m open to everything, unlike others who are extremely narrow-minded.” But can everything be tolerated? The difficulty in this case is that tolerance, while it expresses openness, which is fine, in fact betrays a lack of firmness. Openness is not a value which takes care of everything. Only rubbish bins are open to everything.

Thus, in everyday speech, the word tolerance seems to have become inadequate, whether we are thinking of a lack of openness or too much openness. To reconsider tolerance is to reconsider our way of being, our being together. It is to look for a way of being open without contempt and without lacking firmness.

For these various reasons, I don't like the word "tolerance", and along with other people, I greatly prefer the word "respect". But before I explain why, I should like to remind you that the word "tolerate" has a very fine etymology [origin].¹

"Tolerance and tolerate come from an Indo-European root "tl-" which means "to support", to carry from underneath. In Greek, this root has given us the word *talent*, a gold weight on a set of scales, and *Atlas*, the Titan who carries the world on his shoulders. In Latin and French there is *tollé*, an outcry of indignation, and the beautiful word *relation*, which means support that is renewed."

My brief presentation is built on three words: respect, pluralism and democracy. But since each of these concepts, or the reality it represents, has problems of its own, I am adding a second concept to each. So there will be three sections, on these three themes:

1. Respect and resistance to disrespect
2. Pluralism and anti-totalitarianism
3. Democracy and (a newly coined word) sophialogy.

1. Respect and resistance to disrespect.

The word "respect" comes from another Indo-European root, "spek" or "spok", which means to look. Etymologically, respect means to look back, thus to take the time to pay attention, to take something into account. While the root of the word tolerance has also given us *prelate*, a person who is carried forward to be placed in authority, the root of the word respect gives us *episcopacy*! These religious leaders are everywhere! But I am not here to talk about etymology.

¹René Garrus, *Etymologies du français. Curiosités étymologiques*, Editions Berlin, 1996, pp. 301-303.

Even though the concept of tolerance is problematic today, we must still recognise that today, as always, there are realities and practices which are intolerable. And this is true of certain things that churches and religious communities say or do, and of certain cultural practices and certain economic transactions.

Respect is a very fine value, perhaps one of the finest. But it too may become dull unless we take into consideration its other side, which cannot be separated from it: resistance to disrespect. A swami once said, "If I am in a dialogue and my partner steps on my foot, I stop taking part in the dialogue and I take my foot away!" In a friendly society everything depends on finding the right distance, not being so far away as to ignore others, and not being so close as to trample them underfoot. What one has to do is to respect others deeply, and also to refuse disrespect in both senses, *disrespect for the other on my side*, and *disrespect for me on the side of the other*.

To take the problem from the interpersonal level to the level of the whole society, we have to recognise that almost all societies today are composed, in general, of a majority and a number, perhaps a large number, of minorities. Marx and Engels were certainly right when they asserted that "one fact is common to all past ages, viz., the exploitation of one part of society by the other."² They were certainly wrong to imagine that their kind of revolution was going to put an end to antagonism and exploitation. But that is a problem in itself which, of course, I am not going to deal with here.

Everywhere in the world, the majority has a natural tendency to protect its privileges and to dominate the minorities. Through theological justification – "We are the elect, the carriers of the

² *Communist Manifesto*, English version of Samuel Moore 1888, pub. by Rick Kuhn, Melbourne 2004,

Revelation, of Civilisation . . .” – through political alliances and economic discrimination, the majority usually tends to maintain its power at any price, and too frequently still, tends to abuse its power. This is true in countries with a Christian tradition, whether they are Catholics, Orthodox or Protestant (perhaps a little less in Protestant countries, although . . .), but also in countries dominated by Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and even Buddhists.

To assume an attitude of respect for others and resistance to disrespect looks different, depending on whether you belong to the majority or a minority.

If you are in the *majority*, it will mean making room for others and not taking up all the space for yourselves. But this is much more easily said than done. The terrible, criminal attitude of the Christian churches toward the Jews for almost 16 centuries of their history demonstrates well the intensity of this problem.³ Fortunately, these things have started to change. In Switzerland, it took a very long time until finally a Jewish woman was able to become president of the country. But at least it was possible. In the countries with a Muslim tradition, this process of openness, although it has sometimes been possible in the past, is only beginning. The status of “dhimmi”, the protection accorded to Jewish and Christian minorities in Islamic countries, has often been more enviable than the status of Jewish and Muslim minorities in “Christian” countries. But this status remains fundamentally discriminatory and inferior for these minorities.⁴ The situation of couples in interfaith marriages is still tragic, where non-Muslim husbands are under pressure to convert to

³ Among many other works, see the anthology *L'antisemitisme chrétien*, ed. F. Lovsky. Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1970.

⁴ Besides the well-documented and controversial works of Bat Ye'or on “dhimmitude”, see Mohamed Charfi, *Islam et liberté*, Albin Michel, 1998, pp. 74ff.

Islam, and where the children of such a couple are officially declared to be Muslim. And I must mention also the law against apostasy, which says “You can join our community, you are welcome, but there is no question of anyone here leaving this community to go back home! Beware!”⁵ I could cite a multiplicity of such examples from all religious and cultural traditions in the world, where a great deal of work in resisting disrespect is still needed.

If you are in the *minority*, respect and resistance to disrespect will look quite different. They will consist of respecting the traditions and the good values of your host country, and not abusing its hospitality by engaging in aggressive proselytism or by promoting conflicting values.

Respect for other persons and resistance to disrespect; I could also have said hospitality and hostility, which come from the same Indo-European root, as do also hostage and the French word *hôte*. If there is no respect, or resistance to lack of respect, the *hôte* – it means both host and guest – can feel like one who is taken hostage. Then hospitality will be changed into hostility. Only some form of reciprocity can release us from this downward spiral.

A magnificent statement of what I have just said is found in the book of Leviticus, in the Hebrew Bible which is also Christian. Love of one’s neighbour is evoked twice, for the “alien” and for one’s “brother”:

“When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as

⁵ For a presentation on the theory and practice of apostasy in Islam, cf. Ibn Warraq (ed.), *Leaving Islam. Apostates Speak Out*. New York: Prometheus Books, 2003.

yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.” (19:33-34).

This could be paraphrased by saying, “You who are in the majority, remember that at one time you too were in the minority and were exploited. Remember! Welcome people and do not dominate them! This is a matter of your faith.” As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch wrote in his commentary on this text, “The love and the respect you give to a stranger is the true test of your fear and love of God.”⁶ A foreigner who is respected will gradually stop feeling foreign, and could perhaps one day be perceived as someone close, a member of one’s family. But at that point this closeness brings about new changes.

In the book of Leviticus we may also read this fine text:

“You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbour, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself; I am the Lord.” (19:17-18).

Respect your neighbours and relatives and resist disrespect from them. But take care, say the rabbis who follow the Talmud, the Rachi and the Sifra, thus the legal *midrash* [commentary] on Leviticus: if you must reprimand someone, do it delicately, without telling them all their faults at once, and making sure not to embarrass this brother or sister.

So respect for others and resistance to disrespect is the first binomial. Here is the second.

2. Pluralism and anti-totalitarianism

⁶*The Pentateuch*. New York: Judaica Press, 1986, p. 461.

The societies in which we live are seeing, at the concrete level, an increasingly abundant plurality of religious and cultural communities existing side by side. As we have said, the majority should live together with the minorities and the minorities with the majority. So the social sphere is occupied by an extremely complex plurality of human groupings and world views which are more or less in conflict. I say the *social sphere*, but it must immediately be complemented by the *virtual sphere* through the Internet and the *imaginary sphere* through television and the other media.

There are a multiplicity of groups, notably religious groups, sharing the earth. But it is precisely the particular character of a religious group to claim to be in contact with a God, a sacred and ultimate Reality which is the Foundation of the All – not simply the foundation of that group, thus of a part of the whole, but the Foundation of the All, of everything that is. Elohim is not only the God of the Jews, or the Trinity the God of Christians, or Allah the God of Muslims, or Brahma the God of Hindus, or the expression of Buddha the ultimate reality for Buddhists. Each of these groups perceives its ultimate Foundation as being fundamental for everyone else as well. *The earth may be divided up pragmatically, but heaven is usually occupied along ideological lines.* Hence the work of theologians like John Hick⁷ who try to extend the plurality on earth into a plurality in heaven. This is where all the trouble starts. For most believers in a religious tradition, their ultimate reality is not a part of a whole, it is the Foundation of the All; it is the All. So our pluralistic societies have human groupings which coexist, but their ultimate vision of the world is not pluralistic. For the

⁷ Among other works, see his *A Christian Theology of Religions*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1995, or his article “The Theological Challenge of Religious Pluralism” in a very useful anthology, J. Hick & B. Hebblethwaite (eds.), *Christianity and Other Religions*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2001, pp. 156-171.

most mission-minded of these groups – Christians, Muslims or Buddhists – the plurality becomes the space in which they extend their non-pluralistic vision. And if no limits, either internal or external, are set for their God who is all in all, this God quickly becomes totalitarian. This is one of the main difficulties confronting our societies: the existence of groups with totalitarian aims, or at least all-embracing, non-pluralistic aims, in a setting of plurality.

I have spoken of plurality and the whole. I could also have said *plurality and fullness*. If a church – Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant – is convinced that it has within it the fullness of unity, of the tradition or of the truth, dialogue with it may be perhaps courteous, but will certainly not be productive. It is only when one is conscious of lacking something *oneself* – since what the other side lacks is usually perceived as obvious! – that dialogue can begin to be constructive. If a Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist tradition is convinced that the full Truth resides in Christ, the Torah, the Qu’ran, Brahma or Buddha, dialogue among their representatives will be perhaps polite, but will very soon reach an impasse, which is unfortunately often the case.

Plurality and fullness; I could also have said *equality and superiority*. Our societies assume equality among citizens and consumers. But religious and cultural communities often promote a strong consciousness of superiority. *If awareness of the All is not to be totalitarian, awareness of fullness is not to be invasive, and awareness of superiority is not to crush one’s neighbours, both self-limitation and arbitration are urgently needed.*

Self-limitation. To become aware that one is not the All, but rather a part of it, of not possessing all fullness, but of lacking some things, of not being superior, but rather being equal partners with others in the enterprise of life and of society – this

awareness can come from within, through a spiritual awakening, and from outside, through being confronted in dialogue.

Arbitration. It is not possible for groups with all-embracing, and sometimes totalitarian, aims to co-exist without arbitration, since conflicts are inevitable. To treat these, justice must intervene when there is lack of respect for constitutional values. To prevent them, the national constitution and a third authority must anticipate the difficulties and look after the cohesion of the society. And in my opinion, which will probably be disputed, it is politics which should take up this role of “third authority”. It is not an interfering role, but one of *active and open neutrality*. The political government, whether at the municipal, provincial, national or international level, has the role of looking after harmony in people’s dealings with one another within its territory. In doing this, it should be *neutral*, not favouring one religion over the others, *active*, not withdrawing into a secular ideology which does not see the ambivalence of religious reality as it is, and *open*, taking into account the history and the future of its territory.⁸

To give two very different examples, I think the Council of State in Geneva and the United Nations should, each at its own level, take much more seriously its responsibilities in this regard, notably by calling regular meetings of religious leaders at the provincial or international level. *In general, political authorities should bring the religious authorities together, to restrict the*

⁸ *Being open to history* implies taking seriously the predominant tradition of an area, and not minimising it by pretending to treat everyone “equally”. *Being open to the future* means taking seriously the dynamic development of an area’s traditions – but also defending non-negotiable values such as pluralism (of communities or of world views), freedom (to believe or not to believe), equality (between women and men) and humility (in view of mystery, the law and other persons).

conflicts among them and to strengthen friendly relations. In return, the religious authorities should make it their job to challenge political leaders when the latter abuse their own power, and to call upon them to show humility.

I shall conclude with the third binomial.

3. Democracy and sophiology

Democracy is a political system which is often presented as the least of evils. It is the system in which majority and minorities could live with the least harm. This is probably true. Neither dictatorships, whether left-wing or right-wing, nor theocracies have ever offered as much freedom. But democracy can probably not exist without limits, and certainly not without conditions. I wonder sometimes whether democracy, with its *Greek* roots – equality among citizens and use of a demythologised rationality, with its *Roman* roots – importance of an effective judiciary system, with its *Judeo-Christian* roots – fundamental equality between women and men created in the image of God, with its *Protestant* roots – all human beings are “sinners”, thus capable of abusing power, so that power should have limitations placed on it, with its *humanist* roots – it is for humans, not God, to enact laws for the body politic – I wonder whether this model can really be exported as it is into contexts which do not have the same history. The problems with making it work in so many parts of the world could show that I am right here.

Very quickly, I should like to cite four thinkers who have contested the traditional democratic model and also show how alternatives, or at least complementary concepts, are beginning to be made known.

a. The very controversial rabbi **Meir Kahane**, assassinated on 5 November 1990:

“ . . . democracy and Judaism are two things opposed to one another. They must absolutely not be confused. The objective of a democratic state is to allow people to do exactly what they want. The objective of Judaism is to serve God, and to make people better.”

And, a bit before this:

“ . . . democracy as we know it today is a completely new concept. It is founded on the idea that we are incapable of knowing the truth, that we do not know it. Consequently, since there is no one who knows the truth, no one can speak the truth. So it is the majority which decides. This is a practical conclusion. Judaism is founded on the idea that we do know the truth.”⁹

Rather than democracy, there are Jews who prefer *Toracracy*, just as some Muslims prefer *Shariacracy* or some Christians prefer *Biblocracy*. In other words, democracy can be considered the victory of quantity over quality, a way of regulating conflicts of interest in which the most powerful and most numerous prevail, at the expense of the common good as revealed by God.

In a democratic system, in principle, it is the majority which prevails. However, a majority can be mistaken, and most of all, it can profit from its victory by not taking into consideration the needs of minorities. What will happen to the Jewish Israelis if, some day in Israel, through demographic change, the Palestinian Israelis become the majority? And what will become of democratic principles in certain European localities if traditionalist Muslims gain the majority? This question can be alarming. Thus, under a democratic system, a vote in which the majority wins is not without its problems, if it is not supported

⁹ R. Mergui and P. Simonot, *Meqr Kahane. Le rabbin qui fait peur aux juifs*. Ed. Pierre-Marcel Favre, 1985, p. 33. See also pp. 54,57, 75.

by a world view and fundamental values in which minorities feel that they are recognised and respected.

b. The way democracy functions has been questioned from another quarter entirely, that of political and economic analysis. The liberal thinker **Friedrich von Hayek** provides an illustrious example:

“Democracy has become a fetish, the ultimate taboo which it is forbidden to question. However, it is because of the poor functioning of democracy that modern states are invasive. Liberals are too often incoherent, complaining about state control without asking about the mechanisms which lead to it. The unrest in democratic societies comes from words having lost their meaning. In a democracy, originally, contrary to what happens under a monarchy, the powers of the state were limited by the constitution and by custom. But we have been sliding progressively towards unlimited democracy: a government now can do anything, on the pretext that it represents a majority. Majority rule has taken the place of the law. The law itself has lost its meaning: at first it represented universal principles, but today it is no more than rules which can be changed to serve particular interests . . . in the name of social justice!

“. . . Governments have become charitable institutions which are exposed to blackmail by organised interests. . . Modern [political] parties are now defined by the particular advantages which they promise, and not by the principles which they defend.”¹⁰

This severe criticism is followed by an alternative proposal, for an “alternative utopia” which von Hayek calls “demarchy” (from Greek *demos*, the people and *archein*, authority). This

¹⁰ [von Hayek,] “Les libéraux doivent être des agitateurs”, in G. Sorman, *Les vrais penseurs de notre temps*, Arthème Fayard, 1989, pp. 248-249.

new form would be based on two sorts of standards: on one hand *the law*, which would be a permanent expression of the way society should be conducted, and would be developed by an assembly of its own; on the other hand *governmental directives*, which would regulate current affairs and be developed by a more conventional parliamentary assembly.

Beyond his utopia, von Hayek has simply become aware that a law which regulates how the entire society conducts itself, and does not represent partisan interests, has become necessary.

c. **Albert Einstein**, in a letter of 15 March 1930, in the midst of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, proposed the creation of what he called an “unofficial council”:

*To this council “. . . Jews and Arabs would delegate, on each side separately, four representatives who would be absolutely independent of any political organisation. On each side there would be a doctor, elected by the professional organisation; a lawyer, elected by the judiciary authorities; a workers’ representative, elected by the trade unions; and a religious leader, elected by other religious leaders. These eight persons would meet once a week. They would take an oath not to serve the interests of their profession or their nation, but to seek exclusively and conscientiously the happiness of the entire population. Their discussions would be confidential and could not be revealed even privately.”*¹¹

Beyond the concrete forms which would certainly need to be discussed, this proposition offers a way of seeking the common good, which the usual democratic system of majority rule does not seem capable of offering.

¹¹ Albert Einstein, *Comment je vois le monde*, Flammarion, 1979, pp. 116-117.

d. Current research being done within the **World Council of Churches** (WCC/COE).

The problems which I have raised in this presentation have all been experienced, in one way or another, within the WCC. To sum it up in broad outline, over the years the Orthodox churches have felt more and more uneasy under the parliamentary and pluralist system used in the WCC, a system which on one hand put them in a minority, and on the other hand obliged them to deal with topics which did not represent their interests or were problematic for them. The “Thessaloniki Statement” in May 1998 sent a strong signal of this crisis and led to the creation of a “Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC”.¹² The choice that has been made since for “consensus” decision-making is extremely interesting and certainly has promise for many other organisations. Here too, the democratic system of majority rule is being balanced by a clearer search for the common good.

Thus, as seen through these different examples, democracy seems to call for a complementary institution or a supplementary way of listening, which for lack of another term I call *sophialogy*, that is, a wiser form of discourse, more consensual, more constructive, more concerned for the common good than those which the usual structures are able to offer.

Conclusion

Respect for the other and resistance to disrespect, pluralism and anti-totalitarianism, democracy and sophialogy; these three

¹² For a first analysis of the work of this Commission, cf. the research done by Avtzi Kyriaki, *The Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the World Council of Churches*, Berkeley, 2003 (ki_ki31@yahoo.com).

pairs of concepts are seeking, each in its own way, to point out the problems and challenges which confront our societies.

To build a harmonious society always remains a utopian undertaking. But when men and women of different religions and cultures listen to one another in depth, and feel that they are being heard, something of a utopia is brought into being in a real situation. These are moments and foretastes of bliss.