

## Dispensable and Inconsequential? Reflections on the Value of Tolerance in Interreligious Relations and Dialogue

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### Abstract

In current intellectual discourse, some scholars believe tolerance is unnecessary to interreligious interaction, viewing it either as veiled indifference toward others and their religious idiosyncrasies, or as crude relativism rooted in denial of the truth-claims and moral obligations of religious traditions. This essay addresses these ideas, and explores the possible connotations and hermeneutics of tolerance, providing a fresh reading of its role and value within interreligious relations and dialogue. It proposes a new status for tolerance, by exploring its potential meanings and values in perception of the self, and not just of the other. It then examines Christian-Muslim relations in Middle Eastern history and their notion of tolerance and reinterprets it in light of the Qur'anic notion of 'la ikrah'. A re-conception of tolerance is proposed, which invokes a new understanding of religiosity and religious affiliation: being tolerant in interreligious relations and dialogue means being one's true religious self.

**Key words:** Tolerance, forbearance, interreligious relations, Christian-Muslim Dialogue, Qur'an's '*lā ikrāh*', symbiotic reciprocity, religious alterity

## Introduction: An Impossible Virtue?

Many scholars of religion do not believe that tolerance is necessary to the pursuit of successful interreligious interaction, and some call for it to be disregarded completely. In these circles, tolerance is seen largely as a figurative term for veiled indifference toward the religious idiosyncrasies of others, or as an indication that the tolerating party is less religious, or implicitly indifferent to religiosity. Tolerance is therefore deemed dispensable, because it is not a serious commitment to, or appreciation of, religiosity; rather, it incarnates crude relativism rooted in a denial of the truth-claims and moral obligations of religious traditions.<sup>1</sup>

This conviction drives scholars to speak about tolerance, including in relation to religions, as an *elusive* virtue. They opine that, despite its frequent practice and notoriety in current pluralist ethical and political circles of reasoning and activism, such performance cannot be “matched by [an] analogous theoretical certitude” that would make tolerance a prerequisite for correlative relations on solid inter-relational or dialogical grounds.<sup>2</sup> Most cases that are deemed symptomatic of tolerance among religious and non-religious groups are therefore read as pragmatist calculations and circumstantial compromises, and not as a factual or genuine latitudinarian stance.<sup>3</sup> If individuals are required to abstain from hostility toward members of other religions or groups, it is claimed that this need not be expected or conducted as a matter of tolerance, but because it is “none of our business to interfere with the beliefs and most of the actions of other human beings”.<sup>4</sup>

The concept of tolerance is not just deemed philosophically elusive. Some attest that it is also paradoxical, as it is simultaneously impossible and necessary. Bernard Williams argues this in his essay, “Toleration<sup>5</sup>: An Impossible Virtue?”<sup>6</sup> From a religious history perspective, Williams postulates that the need for tolerance between religions arises when one believes that “the other is blasphemously, disastrously and obscenely wrong”. In other words: “toleration, we may say, is required only for the intolerable. This is its basic problem”.<sup>7</sup> In

1 As described in: Christoph Schwöbel, “Beyond Indifference: Religious Traditions as Sources for Interreligious Toleration”, in *Dynamics of Difference: Christianity and Alterity*, Ulrich Schmiedel and James M. Matarazzo, Jr. (eds.) (London & New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), pp. 255-264, p. 256.

2 See: David Heyd, “Introduction”, in *Toleration: An Elusive Virtue*, David Heyd (ed.) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 3-17, p. 3.

3 See: Heyd, “Introduction”, p. 4: “Refraining from a hostile reaction to members of other religions [...] is accordingly hardly to be considered as displaying tolerance under contemporary pluralistic conceptions”.

4 Heyd, “Introduction”, p. 4.

5 Although ‘tolerance’ and ‘toleration’ have slightly different meanings, they are considered interchangeable in the context of this essay.

6 Bernard Williams, “Toleration: An Impossible Virtue?” in *Toleration: An Elusive Virtue*, pp. 18-27.

7 Williams, “Toleration: An Impossible Virtue?” p. 18.

this sense, the concept is associated with hatred and violent prejudices, which it must necessarily oppose. But if this is the case, Williams proceeds, the healing of hatred and vendettas does not require tolerance. Here, the latter concept goes further than healing hatred; it suggests that something is lost and eliminates the desire to challenge what one does not believe in or does not deem to be correct. If this is the case, Williams argues, tolerance is a trap, since one is equally required to *keep* (never to lose) one's own faith, which is the source of the clash with the belief of the other. One is, therefore, trapped in the paradoxical requirement of simultaneously keeping *and* losing one's own faith, because this faith, which signifies one person's difference from another, is the driving force of hostility toward the other. "There is a tension here", Williams concludes, "between one's own commitments, and the acceptance that other people may have other, perhaps quite distasteful commitments: The tension that is typical of toleration, and which makes it so difficult".<sup>8</sup>

Williams maintains that the first instinctive option in addressing this issue is to resort to indifference, although he asserts that it is not necessarily the same as 'toleration'.<sup>9</sup> Indifference is the easier alternative to tolerance as an exemption from the challenging burden of the latter's dilemmatic demands to simultaneously lose and keep. Toleration "appeared impossible because it seemingly required someone to think that a certain belief or practice was thoroughly wrong or bad, and at the same time that there was some intrinsic good to be found in its being allowed to flourish".<sup>10</sup> The idea is often viewed as a source of trouble, rather than an instrument of dialogue between religions. Religious interlocutors must join forces to avoid it, and thereby achieve genuine interrelation.

This suggests that tolerance is to be dispensed with as unnecessary to interreligious relations, and that it hinders interreligious dialogue, morphing it into a pragmatic relativism and indifference that are hidden behind a mask of forbearance. The ensuing pages contain a reflective conversation on these issues, and they offer potential solutions. They explore the connotations and hermeneutics of tolerance, undertaking a fresh reading of its role and value within the dynamic process of interreligious relations and dialogue. They then propose a new status for tolerance in interreligious relations by exploring its other potential meanings and value-dimensions in their connection to the perception of the self, not just of the other.

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8 Williams, "Toleration: An Impossible Virtue?", pp. 19-20.

9 Williams, "Toleration: An Impossible Virtue?", p. 20.

10 Williams, "Toleration: An Impossible Virtue?", p. 25.

## Interreligious Relations without Tolerance

Upon studying the histories of the monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), some scholars have surmised that tolerance has not been a natural characteristic of these religions' stances on, or interactions with, other faiths. Cambridge historian of ancient sciences Geoffrey Ernest Richard Lloyd endorses this observation:

A monotheistic religion confronted with other conceptions of God is far more liable to be forced on the defensive. The options it has to choose between vary. One militant reaction is to attempt to wipe out or convert their rivals, or at least to ban them from practicing their faith. Alternatively, they may simply ignore them, or more rarely they may show them at least a modicum of tolerance.<sup>11</sup>

The toleration of other beliefs, Lloyd relates, is a rarity: a last resort that followers of monotheistic religions found themselves practicing, albeit in a modicum manner, when they ran out of other options. Lloyd further suggests that when groups within a monotheistic religion aspire to modify or reform this situation and grant tolerance a more central or prominent value, the majority treat them as “a reflection of rivalries internal to the group”.<sup>12</sup> This means that tolerance is an unpopular stance not only toward the external other, but also toward other members of the same faith, who do not view the call to embrace tolerance favourably.

It is no wonder, then, that the history of interaction between the three monotheistic religions only occasionally contains stories of mutual tolerance. Narratives that pertain to interreligious connection in the Middle Ages (e.g., those in the older versions of Lessing's 18<sup>th</sup>-century play, *Nathan the Wise*) relate that ‘tolerance’ was not familiar, “except as the toleration of sinful relation to avoid greater evil”.<sup>13</sup> Marcel Poorthuis confirms,

... there is no serene atmosphere of tolerance prompted by intellectual honesty. On the contrary, the atmosphere is loaded with threat and violence, as was often the case with religions' disputations in that period.<sup>14</sup>

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11 Geoffrey E.R. Lloyd, *Disciplines in the Making: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Elites, Learning and Innovation* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 149-150.

12 Lloyd, *Disciplines in the Making: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Elites, Learning and Innovation*, p. 150.

13 Marcel Poorthuis, “The Three Rings: Between Exclusivity and Tolerance”, in *The Three Rings: Textual Studies in the Historical Dialogue of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Barbara Roggema; Marcel Poorthuis and Pim Valkenberg (eds.) (Leuven & Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2005), pp. 257-285, p. 257. Poorthuis cites: J. Ritter and K. Grünter (eds.), *Historisches Wörterbuch de Philosophie* (Basel: Schwabe, 1971-2007), Vol. 10, “Toleranz”, p. 1251.

14 Poorthuis, “The Three Rings: Between Exclusivity and Tolerance”, p. 261.

It was commonly believed that only one religion could be true, and that truth was to be demonstrated by any means, even in the form of violence.

During the Enlightenment and Modernity, the idea of tolerance gained more attention in religious circles than it had done in previous eras. A few Jon Locke's letters, for example, discuss it in relation to the civil affairs and life of the state. Locke considers tolerance a civil requirement for privatised theological convictions to either thrive or wither on their own, without external public censure or support.<sup>15</sup> This appreciation of tolerance in the political context came to mean "that state of mind and condition of society which enables a pluralist democracy to function well and to realize the idea of pluralism" when applied to the concept of modern American pluralist democracy.<sup>16</sup>

With the creation of the Parliament of the World's Religions in 1893, the call to tolerate the other became a fashionable motivator of an interfaith movement that aimed "to promote positive and constructive relations between the adherents of various religious traditions and considered the ideals of brotherhood, harmony, respect and openness to be of paramount importance".<sup>17</sup> Yet though it was a conceptual root for today's prioritisation of interreligious dialogue, tolerance was excommunicated to the margins of scholarly discourse, which theorised on the nature, components and conditions required to generate genuine interreligious connections. Tolerance was seen as less important than other values and prerequisites, such as freedom, respect, otherness, acknowledgment and affinity. It was consequently relegated from a principal constituent value to a pragmatic and procedural instrument that connoted the forbearance and diplomatic embrace of relativism, subjectivism and scepticism. Although occasionally useful, tolerance was seen as a pragmatic, temporary and circumstantial loosening of one's commitment to his or her own religious convictions. In more recent times, it has been advocated as the only way to appreciate other religions.<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, tolerance became "the critical ethical *lower limit* for interreligious dialogue" (emphasis added),<sup>19</sup> rather than a substantial component of interreligious processes and their evolution: a preliminary behavioural gesture that opened the door to more valuable aspects of dialogue. Tolerance of religious diversity is, therefore,

15 See: Richard Vernon (ed.), *Locke on Toleration*, Michael Silverthorne (trans.) (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

16 Robert Paul Wolff, "Beyond Tolerance", in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, Robert P. Wolff; Barrington Moore, JR. and Herbert Marcuse (eds.) (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), pp. 3-52, p. 4. Wolff highlights the impact of "religious, ethical and racial heterogeneity" on the American pluralist consciousness and suggests that "the deliberate prohibition of an established church made it necessary to acknowledge a diversity of religious communities within the nation" (Wolff, "Beyond Tolerance", p. 12).

17 Marianne Moyaert, "Interreligious Dialogue", in *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, David Cheetham; Douglas Pratt and David Thomas (eds.) (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 193-217, p. 195.

18 Poorthuis, "The Three Rings: Between Exclusivity and Tolerance", p. 285.

19 Moyaert, "Interreligious Dialogue", p. 196.

“a necessary evil, forced upon society which either cannot suppress dissidence or else finds the social cost of suppression too high”, so it surrenders to “a grudging acceptance of *de facto* heterodoxy”.<sup>20</sup> In this light, tolerance is synonymous with compromise, which is the most pragmatic way to deal with competing interests.<sup>21</sup>

This explains why those who emphasize religious particularity and commitment view tolerance as easily dispensable: something whose absence does not substantially influence interactions and dialogue among religious people. Because dialogue requires commitment to one’s own religiosity (otherwise the interlocution is a monologue), the “mutually tolerant existence of religions is simply not possible”.<sup>22</sup> It is also not needed since it is at best superfluous to interreligious dialogue. The only space tolerance can occupy in this centralisation of an ‘other-than’ rationale is one in which dialogue aims to entice the other to capitulate or convert.<sup>23</sup>

Within this framework, *intolerance* is more interesting than tolerance, as it is a key descriptive notion in diagnosing and anatomising an interreligious interaction between a minority and a majority. Here, tolerance and intolerance are not components of the interrelation per se, but are invoked as either subjects of the interlocution, or an excuse for the minority to accuse the majority of unfairness, thereby becoming a basis on which to refuse dialogue.<sup>24</sup> This is one reason tolerance is side-lined and underrated in interreligious dialogue among Muslims and Christians in the Middle East. Their position as a regional minority lacking power drives many Christians to embark upon interlocution with Muslims with the belief that they are under threat from intolerance at the hands of the powerful Muslim majority. In such cases, there is a tendency to disbelieve in the essential role tolerance plays in the framework of interreligious interaction and understanding. It becomes ‘tolerance *simpliciter*’, which “accentuates the domination of a majority group over minority groups”.<sup>25</sup>

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20 Wolff, “Beyond Tolerance”, p. 15.

21 Wolff, “Beyond Tolerance”, p. 21.

22 Douglas Pratt, “Fundamentalism, Exclusivism and Religious Extremism”, in *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, pp. 241-261, p. 246. See also: Gavin D’Costa, “The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions”, in *Religious Studies*, 32(1996), pp. 223-232.

23 Pratt, “Fundamentalism, Exclusivism and Religious Extremism”, p. 246.

24 See: Peter C. Phan and Jonathan Y. Tan, “Interreligious Majority-Minority Dynamics” in *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, pp. 218-240.

25 David Cheetham; Douglas Pratt and David Thomas, ‘Introduction’, in *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, pp. 1-11, p. 8.

## Symbiotic not Dialectic Reciprocity

Preventing one religion or religious denomination from dominating others and threatening their rights and maintaining this tolerant freedom and equality among religious groups are challenges that confront religiously diverse societies and force them to examine their interreligious tolerance. If they do not address these issues, any tilt in the balance of power, influence or societal and legislative prerogatives toward one religion (usually a majority) can be “the first step in a downward spiral of intolerance”.<sup>26</sup>

Currently, such a challenge to religiously diverse societies is present in the Christian-Muslim situation in the MENA region. Past and present relations between the two religions in the geographical region of the Arab Muslim World, especially in the Arab Middle East, are often viewed as a challenging state of co-existence between a dominant, powerful (and therefore prone to intolerance and superiority) Muslim majority, and a powerless, dominated (and therefore suffering from inferiority and striving to gain tolerance) Christian minority. This presumption is the foundation of the *dhimmitude* theory, which was developed with enthusiasm, but without adequate scientific or historiological reliability.<sup>27</sup>

The long history of Christian-Muslim relations in the Arab Muslim World is far more sophisticated and multifaceted than this narrow, binary and essentialising imagination. The Christians were not the dominant minority within the Muslim-majority context of the early Muslim era, at least not until the beginning of the Crusades.<sup>28</sup> More importantly, intolerance toward the different faith and its followers was not one-sided, and it did not follow a single track from powerful Muslims to powerless Christians. The extant Christian *Kalam* texts from the Umayyad and early Abbasid eras, for example, occasionally present Christian apologists who were intolerant of Islamic beliefs and practices (and those of other

26 Roger Trigg, *Religious Diversity: Philosophical and Political Dimensions* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 14-15.

27 For example: the populist publications of Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmi*; and Ye'or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam*.

28 See: Christian Sahner, “Swimming against the Current: Muslim Conversion to Christianity in the Early Islamic Period”, in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 136(2), 2016, pp. 265-284; Thomas A. Carlson, “Contours of Conversion: The Geography of Islamization in Syria, 600-1500”, in *Journal of American Oriental Society*, 135(4), 2015, pp. 791-816; Arietta Papaconstantinou and Daniel L. Schwartz (eds.), *Conversion in Late Antiquity: Christianity, Islam and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2015); Richard Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979); Michael Gervers and Ramzi J. Bikhazi (eds.), *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, eighth to Eighteenth Centuries* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1990); and David Wasserstein, “Conversion and the Ahl al-Dhimma,” in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, R. Irwin (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 184-208.

Christian denominations) and of Muslim cultural-societal rules and conditions.<sup>29</sup> Driven by extravagant religious zeal, some Christians in 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup>-century Syria and Palestine expressed their religious intolerance explicitly, as a primary means with which to preserve their faith and confirm their love for and adherence to the Christian God. This practice was not only used against Muslims, but also against other Christians with different beliefs.

In his monograph, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity*, Thomas Sizgorich touches upon this Christian attitude of intolerance. He relates that, in their attempt to preserve their identity (as lovers of God) in the midst of the radical changes that Islam ushered in in Syria and Palestine, some Christians (especially the stylite hermits of the desert) acted in the belief that “violence received or undertaken in defence of God’s one community upon the earth was in fact virtuous and indeed the highest of all forms of piety.”<sup>30</sup> Motivated by this *Weltanschauung*, the Christian hermits freely expressed their intolerance for ‘false beliefs’, and used violence to protect what they believed was constituent of their self-definition as lovers and servants of God. Sizgorich suggests that when some new Muslim arrivals to these regions encountered the militant Christians, they admired their religious zeal and emulated their intolerance to safeguard their own Islamic piety (*jihad*).<sup>31</sup> Some scholars believe this encounter between equally spiritually intolerant Christians and Muslims to be a possible source of the militaristic ‘*Jihad*’ in Islam, which would place it chronologically before the Crusades.<sup>32</sup> In the Christian-Muslim world of the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries, religious intolerance was therefore practiced similarly by Christians and Muslims, each of whom imagined themselves the “archetypical warriors on God’s behalf”; the defenders of the defining boundaries of true religiosity.<sup>33</sup>

This example, which is in the historical record, validates Clare Wilde’s doubts about the accuracy of reading Middle Eastern interreligious relations as those of intolerant Muslims and non-tolerated Christians:

29 I have touched upon this in earlier publications. See: Najib G. Awad, *Orthodoxy in Arabic Terms: A Study of Theodore Abu Qurrah’s Theology in Its Islamic Context*, (Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 23-58; and N. G. Awad, *Umayyad Christianity: John of Damascus as a Contextual Example of Identity Formation in Early Islam* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2018).

30 Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), p. 2.

31 Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam*, pp. 4-5 ff. This Christian trend may have been the inspiration for the mystic and orthodox thought of scholars like Abdullah Ibn al-Mubarak in early Islam.

32 For the concept of ‘holy war’ in Christian-Byzantine thought, see: George T. Dennis, “Defenders of the Christian People: Holy War in Byzantium,” in *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World*, Angeliki E. Liou and Roy Parviz Mottahedeh (eds.) (Washington, DC: Dombarton Oaks, 2001), pp. 31-39. On *Jihad* in Islam see: Roy Parviz and Ridwan al-Sayyid, “The Idea of the *Jihad* in Islam before the Crusades”, in *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World*, Angeliki E. Liou and Roy Parviz Mottahedeh (eds.) (Washington, DC: Dombarton Oaks, 2001), pp. 23-31.

33 Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity*, p. 12.

'Tolerance' connotes the permission or allowance of beliefs or behaviour with which one disagrees. Is 'intolerance,' therefore, the refusal to accept such beliefs or behaviours, or the active prevention of them? In other words, are tolerance and intolerance only the provenance of those who hold political power or the means of enforcing their rules? As Christian Arabic texts contain both anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim rhetoric, can they be labelled as intolerant, even if their authors wielded little or no political power? If not, does that mean that minorities – religious or political – cannot be intolerant?<sup>34</sup>

To these subtle and thought-provoking inquiries, Wilde responds by expressing the plausible conviction that Christians were intolerant of the beliefs and practices of Muslims, and of the religion of the ruling elites, without themselves enjoying political or religious power or dominance. This means that intolerance is not the exclusive prerogative of the powerful or predominant. As Wilde relates, the lack of political and religious influence could "give greater license for intolerance attitudes and actions on the part of religious minorities"; as if "the tolerance of a ruling power ironically creates space for intolerant minorities."<sup>35</sup> Bernard Williams observes:

We may think of toleration as an attitude that a more powerful group, or a majority, has (or fails to have) toward a less powerful group or a minority. In a country where there are many Christians and few Muslims, there may be a question whether the Christians tolerate the Muslims; the Muslims do not get the choice, so to speak, whether to tolerate the Christians or not. If the proportions of Christians and Muslims are reversed, so will be the direction of toleration.<sup>36</sup>

I concur with Clare Wilde's proposal and Bernard Williams' observation, and I argue further that intolerance among minorities is detectable in the current interreligious context of the Arab Muslim world. There are numerically many fewer Christians than Muslims in the region, which exposes the former to diverse challenging circumstances and conditions, energised by intolerant discourses and policies and hate-speech from radical Muslim polemics. Hate-speech against minorities has become a widespread issue that permeates public squares and media platforms throughout the Arab World. Yet, while this intolerant hate-speech from the dominant majority against the Christian minority is being addressed, equal attention is not being paid to hate speeches directed at the Muslims. Some Christian political and ideological discourses (like the Christian members of the Aounist party called 'the National Free Stream' in Lebanon) use such speech to justify intolerance toward Islam, with the excuse that they are suffering at the

34 Clare Wilde, "Christian- Muslim (In)tolerance? Islam and Muslims according to Early Christian Arabic Texts", in *Intolerance, Polemics and Debate in Antiquity*, George van Kooten and Jacques van Ruiten (eds.) (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2019), pp. 463-485, p. 480.

35 Wilde, "Christian- Muslim (In)tolerance?" p. 481.

36 Bernard Williams, "Toleration: An Impossible Virtue?" p. 18.

hands of the dominant other. Here, it is important to remember Clare Wilde's warning that the powerless can use their minority position to justify reactionary intolerance toward the other.

Intolerance in the Arab Muslim context is reciprocally practiced by both the powerful Muslim majority and the powerless Christian minority. As alluded to above, a counter-intolerant discourse has arisen among some political segments of Christianity in Lebanon (the Aounists) during the past decade. Driven by radical and zealous sectarian and confessionalist worldviews, these Christian political factions have drifted toward a stance on Sunnite Islam that breeds hatred and causes conflict, demonizing the Sunnites and accusing them of radicalism and ISIS-like behaviour. Disguising their intolerance by characterizing it as striving for 'the Christians' rights', this faction manipulated the call for justice and equality into a call for power-sharing and a counter-monopoly in the political and authoritarian sphere. The danger in this *modus operandi* from an inter-religious perspective lies in Christian claims of stigmatisation of their life in a non-Christian (Muslim) world by claiming that this predominant surrounding is backwardly, fanatic, and hates Christianity. They claim that the only way they can survive is to fight back: to mobilize against the Muslim other.<sup>37</sup>

The impact and scale of intolerance practiced by the numerically dominant is usually more durable and easier to spot. Although comparatively lesser in effect and scope, it is intolerance nonetheless. In their counter-intolerance, both Christians and Muslims practice a similar 'construction-by-opposition' (to borrow an expression from Wael Hallaq<sup>38</sup>) strategy of contrariety, which otherizes based on a supra-historical preconception. This dialectically divisive, oppositional, and pseudo-historical reading of Christian-Muslim relations generates anachronistic perspectives, and it allows the contemporary (and far from healthy) era to over project its offensive and polemic memory over both the factual historical narrative and the present condition. As Tarif al-Khalidi opines:

Whenever the sensitivity of any subject escalated at the present time, the history of this subject becomes more and more propagative in nature. For, the historicization we pursue to record the relations between religious groups at a time characterized by sectarian tension cannot often escape offensive or apologetic perspectives.<sup>39</sup>

37 See: N. G. Awad, "al-Masihyyun wa-Mas'alat al-Ḥuquq" (The Christians and the Issue of Rights), in *al-Arabi al-Jadid Newspaper*, May 15, 2017, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%AD%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86%D9%88%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A3%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%88%D9%82>

38 Wael B. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 13.

39 Tarif al-Khalidi, "Al-Lahut al-Masīhi wa-'Ilm al-Kalam al-Islāmī", (Christian Theology and Muslim Kalam Science), in *al-Masihyyun al-'Arab: Dirasat wa-Munaqashat* (The Arab Christians: Studies and Discussions), Elias Houry (ed.) (Beirut: The Arab Studies Institute, 1981), pp. 131-147, p. 139.

In such moments of escalation, even publicly and institutionally featured and elicited tolerance would, to echo the subtle observation of the late Mahmoud Ayoub, “unfortunately [have] within it the seeds of intolerance and hostility, nurtured by a long history of conflict, rivalry, and domination.” This visible tolerance would be a veiled, mutually harboured intolerance, because, as Ayoub continues, “it [is] a tolerance dictated by [confrontational] rather than moral strength, and by political exigencies rather than the imperatives of a common faith in God”.<sup>40</sup>

## The Tolerance-Intolerance Equation in Dialogue

On the current global scene, interreligious relations are almost exclusively centred on dialogue. This is because the idea of ‘dialogue’ is a fashionable trend that permeates every circle of human interaction. It has become the definitive form of interaction between religions, especially if their co-existence in the global context exceeds all divisions, geographical territorialisation, shared borders, identity-bearers, cultural and ethnic differences, and demographic othering. On the theoretical level, dialogue is considered the ultimate hermeneutic code, epistemological notion and methodological tool in almost every religious study or theology program. Correctly or incorrectly, it is the core focus of contemporary human reasoning on interreligious relations.

Amid this, it is easy to forget what Catherine Cornille emphasizes: “Interreligious dialogue is, simply put, a challenge for most religious traditions”.<sup>41</sup> Such dialogue is a challenge to these religions because they are required to practice it, not just think about it academically. On the theoretical level, it is an ideal they aspire toward, as they ponder its value and ethical praiseworthiness. Yet, when it comes to *pursuing* dialogue with the religious other in a responsible and engaged manner, the followers of religions approach the task as an ambitious, if not risky, endeavour that requires serious sacrifices to become a ‘possible im-possibility’.

Cornille postulates that dialogue is so risky in practice because “the main obstacle for dialogue lies not so much outside as within religious traditions” and their self-understanding<sup>42</sup> (this is demonstrated in the aforementioned example of Christian-Muslim relations in the Arab Middle East). A major constitutive factor of factual religious dialogue is the commitment and rootedness of its interlocutors

40 Mahmoud Ayoub, “Islam and Christianity between Tolerance and Acceptance”, in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 2(2), 1991, pp. 171-181, p. 175.

41 Catherine Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Religious Dialogue* (New York: Herder & Herder/Crossroad Publishing Company, 2008), p. 2.

42 Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Religious Dialogue*, p. 3.

in “the particular community from which and for which they speak”.<sup>43</sup> If these elements are not present, the dialogue ceases to be *inter*-religious, and becomes an activity in monological syncretization. To be interreligious, dialogue requires “commitment to a particular religious tradition”.<sup>44</sup> This means that difference and discrepancy (including in numbers) are inherent to any dialogue, and their absence guarantees its impossibility.

On the practical level, this alterity (and commitment to it) not only enables dialogue, but, paradoxically, makes it risky, as it is capable of breeding further intolerance and deeper misunderstanding, rather than generating tolerance, mutual perception and deeper knowledge of the self or other. Here, what interreligious dialogue requires to become a religious inter-relational possibility (i.e., commitment to difference) is the same thing that threatens the possibility that such a dialogue will occur. The theoretical toleration of intolerance is threatened by the practical intolerance of toleration. This makes tolerance itself an inevitable prerequisite for interreligious dialogue and relations. Cornille suggests that “tolerance often includes an attitude of indifference or even disregard for the distinctive beliefs and practices of the other”.<sup>45</sup> This means that the distinction of the other is an indirect indication of the dialoguing agent’s difference from this distinction in terms of belief and practice, even in the context of the agent’s disagreement and discrepancy.

Endorsing dialogue not only expresses “commitment to a culture of tolerance”, but also manifests a realistic, down-to-earth *practice* of tolerance. Here, tolerance does not mean forbearance with the unmerited beliefs of the followers of other religions, as forbearance can be a mere pragmatic, temporary and conditional expression of a positive allowance for the other to be his or her different self. This is embraced in the ultimate purpose of recruiting people of other religions to the ‘true’ belief, which is undertaken by the one who expresses forbearance. This is therefore not true tolerance, but a masked intolerance. True tolerance acknowledges differences and enters dialogue with the other because, and not despite, of them, and it entails full engagement with other religions. Cornille notes that insincere forbearance is not just opposed to true, humble and hospitable tolerance, it is also “unlikely to lead to dialogue”, and prone to “generate a form of mutual apologetics”.<sup>46</sup>

True dialogue does not forbear the commitment of those with other faiths to their religious particularities in an attempt to turn it into intolerance of particular religious beliefs. Nor does it force the other to surrender his or her religious

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43 Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Religious Dialogue*, p. 4.

44 Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Religious Dialogue*, p. 4.

45 Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Religious Dialogue*, p. 25.

46 Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Religious Dialogue*, p. 184.

commitment in favour of the religion of the interlocutor, who manifests figurative tolerance for conversional purposes. Some proselytization-oriented dialoguers believe that the strength of their commitment is measured by the extent of their religious intolerance: i.e., to be faithful to your truth, you should not tolerate the truth-claims of others. Further, if you encounter ‘non-/other-believers’ in a dialogue, you can mask your intolerance with a momentary forbearance of the other’s belief, to convince them to commit to your religious choice and forsake any other. Commitment to, and tolerance of, difference do not mix within this logical framework. To be committed is to be intolerant to difference, though it may involve the obligation to acknowledge this difference’s existence.

From the perspective of the dilemmatic relation between commitment and tolerance, Cornille’s observation that “religions are indeed not always ready for what transpires in dialogue” is plausible.<sup>47</sup> Interreligious dialogue should be an opportunity of mutual transformation and growth, not just for reciprocal understanding and data-collection. If this is the case, interreligious interactions are risky affairs. They demand the association of one’s commitment to his or her own faith with true tolerance of that of the other, and they can generate a needed intolerance among interlocutors of components of their own belief systems, and a scepticism about the truthfulness of these religious ideas and the tenability of committing to them unreservedly. Here, intolerance does not blindly serve commitment, but transforms and reforms it when the intolerance targets one’s own belief. Tolerance does not replace commitment, but it leads to its transformation and progress when it targets the different belief of the other.

Neither tolerance of the truth of other beliefs, nor intolerance of the questionable doctrinal interpretations of one’s own religious system are necessarily symptomatic of a loosening commitment to a religious tradition. Successful engagement in interreligious interaction does not require pursuing a dialogue without commitment, or one that opposes intolerance and defines unconditional tolerance; i.e., one “between individuals belonging to no particular religious tradition”.<sup>48</sup> Such a commitment-free encounter is nothing more than an interaction between individuals driven by their purely personalist and privative interests, picked and chosen according to their singular tastes and judgements, and can only serve “the indulgences of one’s own personal desires and needs”.<sup>49</sup>

47 Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Religious Dialogue*, p. 60.

48 Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Religious Dialogue*, p. 62. Cornille explains that this is a dialogue wherein individuals have the liberty and responsibility to constitute their own conception of truth. In the sociology of religious studies, scholars call these individuals “disembedded, destituted or detraditionalized selves”, who “consider themselves to be self-directional, authorial agents, relying on their own inner-sources of authority, control and responsibility” (Catherine Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Religious Dialogue*, p. 62). See also: Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

49 Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, p. 64.

This form of interaction is no longer *interreligious*, but interpersonal, more like socialization than dialogue. It leads to “endless wandering” without arrival or departure, and it produces “religious hodgepodge” or an “extraordinary mishmash of ideas, a positive ferment of ideas [that have] little obvious connection with each other”.<sup>50</sup>

What interreligious dialogue requires is not compromising commitment, but a revision and re-understanding within, and on the basis of, a tolerance-intolerance praxico-hermeneutic framework. The inability to tolerate the commitment to exclusive and judgmental aspects that one’s own faith shows toward other religions is an accurate and healthy stance, because it “presupposes a certain degree of critical reflection” about this belief, and a “conscious embrace of its truth”.<sup>51</sup> Tolerating the truth’s manifestation in other religions’ discourses and practices may no longer be a diplomatic, pragmatic gesture, but an identifying factor that represents a commitment to a religious belief that genuinely acknowledges the plurality and multi-faceted nature of truth. It is therefore plausible that the transformative impact of interreligious interactions is “prompted by a positive appeal of the other religion [i.e., tolerance], but also by critical conformation with one’s own tradition [i.e., intolerance]”.<sup>52</sup> The former reflects an ‘intolerant tolerance’, while the latter represents an attitude of ‘tolerant intolerance’.

This said, tolerance and intolerance are not necessarily expressive of the rejection and incrimination of the other, contrary to what some scholars argue. In his explanation of the meaning of religious pluralism, Perry Schmidt-Leukel distinguishes pluralism from religious tolerance, because he believes that tolerance connotes a rejection and dislike of others and their beliefs:

The idea of religious tolerance consists in enduring or “tolerating” ideas and practices that one believes to be wrong. Tolerance is the toleration of what we do not like. This is the crucial and precious point of tolerance. Tolerance thus presupposes a negative assessment of what one tolerates. This implies that one can never tolerate everything. Some ideas and practices may be so harmful that their toleration would cause greater evil than their non-toleration.<sup>53</sup>

Schmidt-Leukel concludes that “religious pluralism must not be confused with tolerance”, because tolerance “presupposes a negative assessment of what one

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50 Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, p. 64. See also: Lowell Streiker, *New Age Comes to Mainstreet* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990); and Peter Lemesurier, *This New Age Business* (Forres, Scotland: Findhorn Press, 1990).

51 Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, p. 67.

52 Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, p. 93. See also: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1995); and David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other* (Leuven: Peeters, 1990).

53 Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), pp. 4-5.

should tolerate".<sup>54</sup> While he acknowledges a pragmatic need for tolerance on social, political and public religious levels (thereby granting it importance to an extent), Schmidt-Leukel insists that tolerance is irrelevant to pluralism, and the two are absolutely disconnected. He holds that because the latter represents a positive assessment and the former expresses a negative one, they should not be confused or mutually related in any kind of replacement or pre-conditioning.<sup>55</sup>

Here, Schmidt-Leukel echoes the understanding of tolerance in terms of the previously-scrutinised pragmatic 'forbearance'. Other senses of tolerance, which Schmidt-Leukel sidelines, can, however, be considered. Tolerance can simply be an endurance of differences and an embrace of discrepancies. As Jacques Derrida said, it can also be the tendency to "respect the distance of infinite alterity as singularity", and this perspective would still make tolerance genuinely '*religio*'.<sup>56</sup> Departing from such a perception means that difference and alterity are not considered things to dislike or consider harmful. Although one can tolerate what one disagrees with or refuses to adopt personally, this does not necessarily entail a departure from dislike, hatred or judgemental degradation. A Christian may disagree with the Muslim understanding of the Qur'anic text, or of prophethood. Yet, imagining tolerance toward Muslim expressive of disagreement and discrepancy with Christianity in this context does not automatically denote that the Christian dislikes the Muslim view, or finds it harmful. Tolerance (and intolerance) is not always associated with negativity.

Conversely, Schmidt-Leukel implies that tolerance masks a negative and intolerant stance toward the religious other, where the latter manifests in an external image of forbearance of that which is hated and disliked, and upon which one relies to reject the other. When this tolerance is turned not toward the difference of the interlocutor's other, but toward his or her own religion's exclusivist and judgmental aspects, it becomes an expression of a negative assessment of one's own religious tradition, rather than that of the other. A Christian is tolerant toward the Muslim belief in the Prophet Muhammad because he dislikes and does not tolerate his own Christian pejorative and degrading discourse against

54 Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology*, p. 5.

55 Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology*, p. 5.

56 Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone", in *Acts of Religion*, Jacques Derrida; Gil Anidjar (ed.) (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 40-101, p. 60. In this understanding, Derrida defies and alternates the conventional belief challenged by the French Enlightenment: that "the concept of tolerance, *stricto sensu*, belongs first of all to a sort of Christian domesticity [...] a secret of the Christian community. It was printed, emitted, transmitted and circulated in the name of Christian faith [...] the lesson of tolerance was first of all an exemplary lesson that the Christian deemed himself alone capable of giving to the world, even if he often had to learn it himself [...]. The Christian religion [...] teaches tolerance better than any other religion, before every other religion". In contrast, Derrida invokes Voltaire's criticism of such conviction as a lesson addressed above all to the Christians, who are "The most intolerant of all men" (Voltaire, in: Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone", pp. 59-60).

the prophet of Islam. Or, a Muslim tolerates the Christian belief in the Bible because he or she does not tolerate the Muslim discourse of scriptural falsification (*tabrif*). In this sense, tolerance is an expression of genuine appreciation, even liking, of the other and his or her religious ideas, equal to that of pluralism. If it harbours negativity and dislike, such a discursive stance discloses intolerance toward that which disavows plurality, acceptance and positivity, and breeds discrimination, exclusion and condemnation. That said, tolerance and plurality are not different, separated or totally unrelated. Tolerance can be an outcome or expected result of pluralism, just as pluralism is the consequence and conclusion of self-targeting intolerance. Failing to tolerate the exclusivity and judgmentalism of one's own religion generates a pluralist approach that naturally manifests in a genuine tolerance of the other.

### Tolerance: In What Sense, to What End?

The analysis in the previous sections is an invitation to question the reductionist and marginalising tendencies of tolerance's connotations and their relevance to interreligious relations and dialogue. Tolerance is not just a practical tool, itself tolerated as a necessary, even inescapable, 'suspicion-breeding' attitude among the members of various religions. It might be the case that what relegates tolerance to such a marginal, devalued and trivialized status in the understanding of interreligious affairs is its own usage and meaning. Mistaken understandings of tolerance may be the reason behind the failure in the practice of genuine tolerance and intolerance alike, and they may explain why they are both treated as virtuous and constitutive components of interreligious relations and dialogue.

Olli-Pekka Vainio expounds this idea in his 2011 essay, "Virtues and Vices of Tolerance". According to Vainio, there are various public uses of the concept of 'tolerance' that merit forensic criticism, because "they fall short of the virtuous goal, which they are clearly trying to reach".<sup>57</sup> The first mistaken use of 'tolerance' is that which "express[es] self-congratulation", and makes a person boast: "I am tolerant, while you people are closed minded bigots".<sup>58</sup> Vainio explains: "It is questionable whether this counts as genuine tolerance, because it seems that if it

57 Olli-Pekka Vainio, "Virtues and Vices of Tolerance", in *Religion in the Public Sphere: Proceedings of the 2010 Conference of the European Society for Philosophy of Religion*, Roger Trigg and Niek Brunsveld (eds.) (Utrecht: Ars Disputand, 2011), pp. 273-284, p. 275. See also: Paul Riceour, "The Erosion of Tolerance and the Resistance of the Intolerable", in *Diogenese*, 44/4 (1996), pp. 189-201; and: T. M. Scanlon, *The Difficulty of Tolerance: Essays on the Political Philosophy* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

58 Vainio, "Virtues and Vices of Tolerance", p. 276.

were in one's own power to stop the other from acting according to their views, one would do so".<sup>59</sup>

Vainio continues that the second misunderstanding of tolerance conceives it as an expression of "imprecise relativist attitudes".<sup>60</sup> This understanding is wrong because it gives the false impression that difference is unqualifiedly and unconditionally tolerated. Vainio stresses that there is no such thing as tolerating unqualified or generic difference in real life. Tolerance here becomes another name for relativism, in the sense of putting everything on a par. But, if this were correct there would be nothing left to tolerate, because everything would be the same; tolerance would be a casual, habituated 'acceptance' that obliterated *inter*-action.<sup>61</sup>

The third misunderstanding of tolerance is when it is deemed a vice that justifies intolerance. Vainio explains:

Tolerance appears as something negative because it is feared that giving room to those who disagree with us will enable them to grow in numbers and turn against us [...] The concept [of tolerance] is used, but it points to something that is in fact vicious in that particular context, making intolerance the virtuous course of action in certain given situations.<sup>62</sup>

There is not space here to analyse Vainio's thought-provoking essay in detail. Suffice it to say that his perception of misinterpretations and misuses of tolerance, which rail against discerning its value and constitutive status in interreligious relations and dialogue, is plausible. If tolerance were to become redundant, dispensable and best avoided in interreligious dialogue, this might be because it is misunderstood. If tolerance means forbearance, or one of Vainio's three connotations, it must, be sidelined, or even evaded, to guarantee that interreligious relations will sustain genuine *dia*-logue and true *inter*-relation. It is, therefore, not unexpected to see religious interlocutors backslide tolerance into negligence, or for a scholar like Alasdair MacIntyre to state that it is considerable only "as far as it serves the purpose of a certain kind of rational enquiry and discussion, in which the expression of conflicting points of view enables us through constructive conflict to achieve certain individual and communal goods".<sup>63</sup> Paul Riceour detects traces of the presumption that underpins MacIntyre's appraisal in the general, public view of tolerance today, where "we approve of everything, because everything is the same, because everything is equal", and therefore the new figures of tolerance are "arbitration and protection".<sup>64</sup>

59 Vainio, "Virtues and Vices of Tolerance", p. 276.

60 Vainio, "Virtues and Vices of Tolerance", p. 276.

61 Vainio, "Virtues and Vices of Tolerance", p. 276.

62 Vainio, "Virtues and Vices of Tolerance", p. 277.

63 Alasdair MacIntyre, "Toleration and the Goods of Conflict", in *Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 205-223, p. 223.

64 Riceour, "The Erosion of Tolerance and the Resistance of the Intolerable", p. 196.

If this is what ‘tolerance’ stands for, the interaction and dialogue between religions do not necessarily require it, nor do they need it to reach full and true actualisation. This essay demonstrates that it is *because* every religion is particular and their faiths are divergent that tolerance is constitutive of any inter-religious dialogue, and it cannot be dispensed with. Differences are not indifferent in interreligious relations,<sup>65</sup> but highlight what makes one’s own religion *not* the religion of others: that ‘tolerating self-intolerance’ and ‘not tolerating wrong tolerance’ are both inherent to true religious interrelation and dialogue. Tolerance is foundational because there is no place for indifference in interreligious relations.

Although it does not use a particular Arabic term to specifically express it, the Qur’an contains a valuable understanding of tolerance in interreligious relations when it speaks in various *suras* against ‘coercion’ (*ikrah*). The Qur’an states that the Prophet Mohammad expressed his tolerance toward non-Muslims when he said to the polytheists of Mecca: *لَكُمْ دِينُكُمْ وَلِي دِينِي* (*lakum dinukum wa-li din/* to you your religion, and to me mine) (Q. 109:6). This is understood to mean that co-existence and recanting coercion are the kind of tolerance that is needed between people of different faiths and those who follow Islam. The Qur’an further states that there is no coercion in religion (*la ikrah fid-din*) (Q. 2: 256), because belief is in the hands of God, and it is not ours to use it to coerce people (Q. 10:99-100). Even in verses that speak about *jihad*, this is not associated with practicing coercive conversion over others to make them succumb to Islam.<sup>66</sup>

The idea of rejecting coercion (*ikrah*) is useful to understanding tolerance in relation to interreligious dialogue and co-existence. To be tolerant means to accept and embrace the existence and alterity of the other, not because you are coerced to concede plurality, diversity and differences due to particular circumstances or calculations. Rather, it entails embracing otherness *because* you are intolerant to coercion and emancipated from it, be it the coercion you direct towards the other, the one with which you confront yourself in order to relate to the other; the one the other directs toward you; or the one the other exerts on him or herself to find a way to deal with you. The Muslim Holy Scripture is telling us that tolerance means ‘non-coercion’ (*la ikrah*), and intolerance is another name for coercion (*ikrah*). Tolerance is the opposite of the forbearance generated from any kind of coercion. To forebear is to be forced to do something; to tolerate is to opt for something beyond, or opposite, the state of forceful forbearance.

In light of the idea of ‘coercion’ and its rejection, tolerance as expression of non-coercion is the manifestation of interreligious relations on the basis of *freedom* (one of the connotations of ‘*la ikrah*’), and not as an outcome of necessity

65 Riceour, “The Erosion of Tolerance and the Resistance of the Intolerable”, p. 196.

66 Yohanan Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 87-120.

or obligation. From the perspective of non-coercion, one desires to tolerate the alterity of the religious other; without this, one must be denied the freedom to “express the opinion that the other religious [beliefs] are wrong, lacking or mistaken” in one’s own appraisal.<sup>67</sup> Holding such an opinion on the other’s belief is part of one’s freedom of belief and thought. Conversely, coercing such an opinion and forcing it on one’s toleration of the religious other opposes freedom; it is a manifestation of the degradation and sidelining of tolerance as a valueless and dispensable element of interreligious dialogue. Tolerance as ‘non-coercion’ is the prerequisite for the application in interreligious dialogue of the principle: “No criterion of judgment can be applied to the faith of the other that has not already been applied to one’s own faith”.<sup>68</sup>

The understanding of interreligious relations and dialogue on the basis of tolerance as ‘non-coercion’ (*la ikrah*) invites religious interlocutors to reconsider their perception of ‘truth’. The understanding of truth that is shaped according to notions of ‘freedom’ and ‘non-coercion’ challenges the classical religious belief that only one’s own religion represents the truth, and all other faiths are false. From the perspective of tolerance, one has every right to disagree with what the other deems to be true, and he or she can refuse to adopt it. But this does not permit that person to coerce the other to concede their own alternative understanding of the truth and succumb to the former’s alternative belief.

From this perspective of tolerance as non-coercion, Gianni Vattimo’s scepticism about the notion of ‘truth’ is plausible. Vattimo opposes the idea of ‘truth’ and refuses to deem it a criterion or referential notion in any context, religious or not. For him “truth is not encountered but constructed with consensus and respect for the liberty of everyone, and the diverse communities that live together, without blending, in a free society”.<sup>69</sup> While I concur with Vattimo’s sensitive emphasis on mutual respect and equal liberty as constituents of pluralist co-existence, I do not believe that consensus is a precondition for constructing a perception of what is ‘truth’ and what is not. Inter-relationality allows for the co-existence of more than one perception and interpretation of truth without necessarily threatening mutual respect. As long as members of different religious faiths refuse to resort to coercion, their discrepancies in approaching and understanding truth might be an essential manifestation of their diversity and liberty, and of preventing authoritarianism from “rearing its

67 Clare Ruth Melqvist, “Five Arguments against Religious Tolerance Relativism”, in *Religion in the Public Sphere*, pp. 251-258, p. 252.

68 Hugh Goddard, *Christians and Muslims: From Double Standards to Mutual Understanding* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1995), p. 10.

69 Gianni Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 36. See also: Trigg, *Religious Diversity*, p. 26. Trigg notes that “the steps from reality and truth to our knowledge, to our certainty, and then to our willingness to coerce others are large” (Trigg, *Religious Diversity*, p. 26).

head”<sup>70</sup> in society. Interreligious relations do not need consensus, and this may cause the passive acceptance of all beliefs for the sake of combining them in an artificial homogeneity. Roger Trigg notes that this could result in “a reluctance to criticize any belief publicly [... that which] produces a vacuum [... wherein] all kinds of coercive and recognizably irrational views may flourish”.<sup>71</sup> Instead of eliminating coercion, such a tendency may unintentionally “allow intolerant forms of belief to fester unchallenged”.<sup>72</sup>

## The Inevitability of Tolerance: Towards A Conclusion

Werner G. Jeanrond articulates the foundational significance of alterity and relationality in Christianity: “Christianity is not interpreted as the restoration of tradition, but as the creation and re-creation of tradition through communication with others”.<sup>73</sup> If religion is by default a ‘relation’ (as Jeanrond also states elsewhere),<sup>74</sup> then what he relates here is applicable to religion in general, and it has plausible implications for interreligious relations. The previous quotation can therefore be amended to reflect that interreligious dialogue and relations not only enable self-interpretation, but also provide an opportunity for both sides to perceive their particularities, and to transform them through correlation with the religious other. In this sense, relating to the other does not compromise one’s own alterity, but rather constitutes it. Embracing the other is a path toward the re-perception and reconfiguration of this alterity. There is no interreligious relation or dialogue if the other’s difference is negated, relativised or treated with indifference. Such forbearance of the other’s identity nullifies dialogue and eliminates inter-relationality, because it negates particularities and compromises difference.

Approaching tolerance from the perspective of the constitutive importance of alterity makes it an indispensable and inevitable precondition for every interreligious relation and dialogue. It embraces the alterity of the other as a

70 Vattimo, *A Farwell to Truth*, p.12.

71 Trigg, *Religious Diversity*, p. 108.

72 Trigg, *Religious Diversity*, p. 108.

73 See: Ulrich Schmiedel, “(Instead of the) Introduction Open to the Other: The Dynamics of Difference in Werner G. Jeanrond’s Hermeneutical Theology”, in *Dynamics of Difference Christianity and Alterity*, Ulrich Schmiedel and James M. Matarazzo, Jr. (eds.) (London & New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), pp. 1-14, p. 9. See also: Werner G. Jeanrond, *Call and Promise: The Challenge of Christian Life* (New York: Continuum, 1995); and Werner G. Jeanrond, “Belonging or Identity” *Christian Faith in a Multi-Religious World*, in *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*, Catherine Cornille (ed.) (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), pp. 106-120.

74 Schmiedel, “(Instead of the) Introduction Open to the Other: The Dynamics of Difference in Werner G. Jeanrond’s Hermeneutical Theology”, p. 1.

requirement for relating to and transforming one's own religious difference. In a dialogue based on this sense of tolerance, Christian and Muslim interlocutors would not only embrace and relate to each other's distinction and otherness, they would also embrace their own difference and transform into it. Inter-relationality and dialogue are in essence a tolerance that makes interlocutors both aware of their own religious self, and able to re-create that self transformatively.

In his reflection on tolerance, the late German theologian, Christoph Schwöbel, warns of "the failure to connect the virtue of tolerance to the religious beliefs and convictions of believers".<sup>75</sup> In doing so, Schwöbel draws our attention to one of the main reasons that some scholars undermine and dispense with tolerance: Relegating and sidelining it will not influence religious interlocutors, and will not influence either the presentation of their own faith or their treatment of the presented faith of the other. One can tolerate the other without necessarily involving this conception of tolerance in one's own reaction, or in relation to the other's religious convictions. Schwöbel states that limiting tolerance to the personal otherness of the other and dissociating it from the other's conviction and belief does not result in a genuine embrace of, or relating to, that other's difference. It is, rather, "an ill-disguised excuse for indifference".<sup>76</sup> Conversely, Schwöbel stipulates that "the cultivation of my religious identity [i.e., alterity] and developing a culture of toleration cannot be understood as opposites, but as have the same ground".<sup>77</sup> Treating them as opposites means that the religious interlocutors are engaged in a dialogue that does not concern religious traditions but is about anything other than faith.

Tolerating the other is not just an acknowledgment of the existence of the different religious tradition of the other and the alterity it generates. It is also a definition and manifestation of the difference or alterity of one's own religious tradition, and one's attestation that tolerance is a defining component of one's own belief. As Schwöbel states: "what we understand as being constitutive for our faith also becomes the ground for the toleration of the faith of others".<sup>78</sup>

Being tolerant in interreligious relations and dialogue means being truly *religious*: being one's true religious self. Every interreligious relation implies an extent of self-relativisation that expresses the awareness that one's own religious identity is not truly transformative unless it is related to the alterity and religious difference of the other. Without the role of tolerance in the constitution of dialogue and inter-relationality, their processes will be neither *dia*-logical or *inter*-religious, nor will they be truly *religious*.

75 Schwöbel, "Beyond Indifference: Religious Traditions as Sources for Interreligious Toleration", p. 256.

76 Schwöbel, "Beyond Indifference: Religious Traditions as Sources for Interreligious Toleration", p. 257.

77 Schwöbel, "Beyond Indifference: Religious Traditions as Sources for Interreligious Toleration", p. 257.

78 Schwöbel, "Beyond Indifference: Religious Traditions as Sources for Interreligious Toleration", p. 259.

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# Nebitni i bezvrijedni? Refleksije o vrijednosti tolerancije u međureligijskim odnosima i dijalogu

## Sažetak

U današnjoj intelektualnoj i akademskoj areni, malo ih je koji misle da je tolerancija išta više od neophodnog zahtjeva za ostvarivanjem uspješne međureligijske interakcije. Tolerancija se smatra ili samo simboličnim imenom zamaskirane ravnodušnosti prema drugima i njihovim osebnim religijskim karakteristikama ili se smatra da ona maskira sirovi relativizam usađen u osporavanju prava na istinu i moralnih obaveza religijskih tradicija. U ovom članku, pokrećem analitičku raspravu sa gorespomenutim stavovima o toleranciji. Istražujem i druge moguće konotacije i hermeneutiku toleriranja i druga čitanja njegove uloge i vrijednosti unutar dinamičkog procesa međureligijskih odnosa i dijaloga. Nastojim utvrditi neophodnu i dragocjenu ulogu i status tolerancije u odnosu između religija time što istražujem druga moguća značenja ovog pojma i druge vrijednosne dimenzije koje se odnose na samospoznaju, a ne samo na shvatanje drugog. Osvrćem se na kršćansko-muslimanske odnose u historiji Bliskog istoka i njen odnos prema ideji „tolerancije“, a zadržavam se i na konkretnoj reinterpetaciji „tolerancije“ s obzirom na kur’ansku ideju „lā ikrāh“. Iznosim stav da bi nas jedna reinterpetacija „tolerancije“ zaista mogla podstaknuti da samu religioznost i religijsku pripadnost shvatamo na novi način. Biti tolerantan u međureligijskim odnosima i dijalogu znači biti istinski religiozan, biti zaista religijski svoj.

**Ključne riječi:** tolerancija, strpljivost, međureligijski odnosi, kršćansko-muslimanski dijalog, kur’anski princip *la ikrāh*, simbiotski reciprocitet, religijski alteritet