Religious Tolerance between Truth and Kindness

PHD THESIS

SUMMARY

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Summary

The research starts from E. Lévinas' observation that the depth of the problem of religious tolerance is to solve the tension between truth and kindness created by the encounter with the other. As the title of the paper suggests, the history of religious tolerance can be interpreted as a game of equilibrium of these values, in which the inclination of the balance towards one over the other marked the transition to different forms of intolerance. In this respect, the work examines first, the evolution of the concept of tolerance in terms of abandoning goodness in a fanatical preoccupation with truth. Then, following the changes that took place within this concept, it deals with the dangers that accompany the option for kindness to the detriment of truth.

Interest in the subject has been aroused by the concern over the consequences of a series of changes that marked the course of existence in the Western cultural space of the last decades. Among these, one can speak, on the one hand, of the hasty sacrifice of truth on the altar of a superficial promise of peace. This perspective is associated with a generalized fear of any claim of truth of religious beliefs. Moreover, within this view, religious exclusivism becomes a synonym for fanaticism and violence. On the other hand, there is a growing tendency to criticize the ideal of tolerance as a mask of the devaluation of the other, to which one could add the numerous proposals of overcoming this stage of relating to the other by replacing it with alternative ideals, which I have summed up under the concept of a new tolerance. The essence of this change can be explained by a drift in the definition of tolerance from accepting the existence of different points of view, to the acceptance of these views as alternative concepts of equal value. In this perspective, intolerance extends its scope of being refused to accept the expression of opposing opinions in public space, to encompassing any questioning of the premise stating the equality of validity and value of all points of view. At the same time, this transformation is the result of placing the discourse of tolerance in the context of ethical pluralism, which supports the existence of a variety of doctrines and moral values that cannot be reduced to a unique source from which they derive. Finally, these changes bring about a devaluation of the role of Christianity as a source of values for the Western culture.

By associating philosophical perspectives with historical and social elements, and by emphasizing the links and correspondences between the perceived transformations both at the individual level and at the level of society, the work analyzes different approaches to the concept of religious tolerance, attempting to highlight the main consequences of the views

discussed. The choice of addressing the issue of tolerance from an ethical perspective is motivated by the observation that despite the ideals expressed by the political discourse, there is a significant discrepancy between the theoretical level of tolerance and the practical one, mirrored by everyday life. In other words, even though most people would subscribe to the definitions of political tolerance in theory, they are intolerant in practice, tracing exceptions or refusing to tolerate certain groups or certain facts that seem particularly offensive to them. Thus, tolerance becomes a virtue necessary to each individual, to offset the limits of solutions at the political level.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of maintaining the balance between truth and kindness in order to understand the value of religious tolerance and its relevance to the problems of today's society. In this sense, I have proposed that, investigating various aspects of the relationship between religious tolerance and truth, let us show that the exclusive truth specific to religious beliefs does not necessarily lead to the practice of intolerance. Alongside this problem, I argued that tolerance is the most appropriate response to the reality of the irreducible diversity of ethical and religious doctrines coexisting in the cultural space of the West.

To serve the logic of argumentation, the work is structured according to the two main issues mentioned above. In the first phase, it focused on the relationship between religious exclusivism and intolerance. Following the history of the concept of tolerance from the first centuries of Christianity to the present, we have sought to show what happens when tolerance loses the balance between kindness and truth, choosing one of these values to the detriment of the other. The first chapter looks at the historical context in which tolerance, originally seen as a virtue necessary for Christian life to cope with persecution, is abandoned in favor of a theology of persecution. Starting from the analysis by Edwin Curley, we have shown that the theological endorsement of church persecution is not a logical consequence of biblical teaching, but a perversion of it. It adds to the teachings of the original text that speaks of the excommunication of the heretics within the church community, a step of their legal condemnation by the state. This has been facilitated, and it could be argued, even demanded by the special conjuncture of the type of relationship established between the church and the state after the Edict of Thessalonica and Constantinople. Despite Augustin's initial intentions, the theory of persecution he developed had an unfortunate influence on the development of Christianity in the following centuries, being later taken over by Thomas Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin.

It is only after the Reformation that one can speak of a revaluation of the idea of tolerance, which has become necessary due to the endless struggles between the various denominations that appeared within Christianity. Proponents of tolerance sought to justify the necessity of this ideal using a variety of arguments, from theological, to political and philosophical arguments. By analyzing these types of arguments, we sought to respond to a thesis supported by various critics of religion, according to which, in order to consistently support tolerance, it is necessary to embrace the premise of radical skepticism capable of undermining the exclusiveness of the revealed beliefs. The supposition that stands behind this statement is that such beliefs constitute a framework that will inevitably lead to intolerance. To this end, I

argued that the skepticism of atheistic humanism proved to have the same potential to degenerate into violent political theories. This is due to the fact that the option of skepticism has shown the same exclusivity as that of the doctrines it criticized, giving up the temptation of totalitarianism. At the same time, I stressed that the claim to abandon the truth of faith for the sake of tolerance proves a superficial understanding of the religious phenomenon, being an inadequate solution to the problem of religious intolerance.

In Chapter 2, I took a step further in analyzing the relationship between religious exclusivity and intolerance, placing the discussion within criticism of tolerance from the perspective of postmodern theories. In this sense, I stopped at two main lines of argumentation. First, I focused on the perspective of the new pluralism, which, unlike the old pluralism, not only observes the existence of a multitude of moral and religious doctrines, but at the same time asserts their equality, involving a personal attitude and a way of reporting to the world and to the other. The second approach is that of the post-secularization of religion, which involves withdrawing and limiting the relevance of religious beliefs to the sphere of private life, as well as their removal from the transcendental dimension. These two perspectives appear to rephrase the idea that tolerance is only possible by renouncing the belief in the truth or superiority of a religious vision, conveying the message that life is better in their absence.

By criticizing the ideal of the new pluralism, I have emphasized that it carries in itself the danger of losing the freedom of conscience in whose name it is legitimized. It seems to assume the adoption of an ethical neutrality position, but this not only does not exist but is also exclusive. Besides, following up the consequences of such ethical doctrine, I have shown that it would lead to the inability to distinguish between good and evil, transforming moral judgments into random and biased decisions. This is refortified by the transformations suffered by religious beliefs. The deletion of their authority makes the answers to the essential questions of life to be sought in other directions. Brad Gregory notes that in this case, the spectrum of responses is extended to anything that can be said or invented by human beings. However, Roy A. Clouser points out that regardless of which alternative is adopted, behind it is a religious belief. Thus, the affirmation of religious neutrality is superficial, and the differences between the way we understand and interpret the world are explicable precisely because of the religious nature of the prephilosophical assumptions of the different visions adopted. Taking a step further in our argumentation, we have shown that intolerance must not be attributed to the religious nature of the differences. In fact, their nature does not determine how we relate to each other, rather than the difference we determine.

The above conclusions lead us to ask ourselves whether, in this case, we can hope for dialogue instead of intolerance or isolation? In this sense, the next chapter stops on how potential conflicts and differences are seen from the perspective of the narrative identity theory. Within it, individual identity is perceived as the story of one's own life, of each life. It is constituted by language, which helps us interpret and give coherence and significance to the different events we experience. However, in this process, relationships with others are of crucial importance, because life has a fundamentally dialogical character, and our ability to define our own identity is given by the language we only acquire in relation to another. Within this theory, the differences that originally appeared as something negative can be

positively capitalized, because we define our own identity in dialogue with the other, sometimes even fighting against what the otherness would like to see in us. Thus, conflict situations become opportunities to better understand our own story, our own identity, which is defined not only by what includes us, but also by what excludes us.

What one can conclude from this approach is that the tension between truth and tolerance is only an apparent one, and the positive approach to conflicts serves the purpose of creating individual identities. By engaging in dialogue with the other, an implicit and sincere dialogue, we can negotiate our own identity and our own quests in order to understand the individual meaning and the formation of the story of our own life.

While the first part of the paper tried to show the necessity of preserving the tension between kindness and truth for shaping a ethics of tolerance, the second part focused on the revalorization of the position of tolerance in solving the conflicts between different visions. In this sense, I sought to bring some conceptual clarifications on what tolerance is as an ethical value and what its objects are. I have shown that it must be distinguished from indifference, resignation, pluralism and the enthusiastic celebration of differences. At the same time, it does not always embrace the option of non-interference, it is not merely permissiveness, nor does it presuppose adopting a position of neutrality, rather encouraging rational dialogue.

Tolerance is a way of dealing with conflict situations, which involves a free and deliberate choice of an agent based on a moral principle. In essence, it involves choosing to respect the person and one's freedom despite the offense or suffering that a particular action can cause. This does not mean embracing any lifestyle or system of alternative values. Tolerance does not exclude the criticism and the freedom to form and support your own point of view. In this sense, tolerance stands as a guarantee for freedom of conscience and expression, while postmodern ideals that support the need to overcome this stage inevitably lead to totalitarian imperatives.

The last chapter is focused on the need for a moral principle to support tolerance. I have highlighted that although many theories of tolerance speak of such a principle, it needs a system of values to support it. Starting from here, I returned to one of the problems we have set out, namely, whether Christianity can be understood as an ethical system that supports tolerance. I have highlighted in this sense that the devastating political theories of the last century have supported common ideals with those of the Christian vision, such as kindness, equality, justice and harmony. But history shows that such moral values cannot be imposed from the outside. They must be produced in response to an inner change that will then manifest itself outwardly. In this sense, Christianity and no other source of values can ensure the creation of a tolerant mentality, but it can provide a framework to support it. And change involves an individual and gradual process.

The paper does not claim to exhaust the possibilities that open when it comes to the relationship between religious tolerance, truth and kindness in the context of Western diversity. However, it can be said that the analysis succeeds to signal the losses and dangers accompanying the change in the discourse of tolerance in the context of postmodernity, representing a starting point for future research.

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