

What makes tolerance costly?

Let me first greet you at this occasion of the launching of the Proceedings of an important conference, held in March 2015 in this very place. I was looking forward to sharing this event with you, but for family reasons I had to withdraw.

The theme of the conference in 2015 was 'Costly Tolerance'. As one of the organizers, I do remember why we choose this qualification of tolerance as *costly*. We wanted to stress that tolerance, i.e. *real* and *sincere* tolerance is not cheap. It costs, it has a prize that you must pay if you really intend to be tolerant. In this contribution I want to show that by way of referring to some of the conference papers.

[dia 2]

Bonhoeffer

But let me first share a personal theological observation with you. The word 'costly' reminds me (and many of my colleagues, I suppose) of the words of a famous German Christian theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As a young theologian he wrote a book, *Nachfolge*, in 1937, during the time of the national-socialist regime. Eight years later, he was executed as one of the last victims of the Nazi terror, not yet 40 years old. He paid the highest price, the price of his life, for what he saw as an inevitable consequence of his choice to follow Jesus Christ, resistance against Adolf Hitler, if necessary by means of a conspiracy against Hitler's life.

Nachfolge – the title of the English translation of this book became: *The Cost of Discipleship*. In this book Bonhoeffer rejects what he calls "cheap grace", i.e. "the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ".

That is what Bonhoeffer saw in Nazi Germany. The oppression of Jews and other minorities by the government intensified. Injustice and violence increased. Most of the church leaders did not have the courage to speak out against this development: they rather adapted to the regime or even explicitly supported its policies. And every Sunday in all churches grace was proclaimed, the grace of God. God is a loving God, gracious, merciful, the pastors would say. And of course, all children of the church would be baptized, regardless of the opinions or activities of their parents. And nobody would be excluded from the sacrament of Holy Communion. This is what Bonhoeffer called 'cheap grace'. It does not cost. It has no consequences. For Bonhoeffer this was unacceptable. Grace is costly: living from God's grace changes lives.

That comes close to what we wanted to express when we choose the theme *Costly Tolerance* for this important conference of March 2015. Tolerance, *real* tolerance is not cheap; it costs, it has a price, it might even be expensive.

Call for papers

[dia 3]

When we invited scholars to participate in and contribute to this conference, we expressed our intention in the call for papers in the following words:

Tolerance is key to multi-religious societies like Indonesia and the Netherlands, although tolerance finds different expressions in different contexts. From a historical perspective, however, the

common colonial history has influenced both contexts. E.g., traditional views of Islam in the Netherlands have been shaped by experiences and studies in the context of colonialism and mission, whereas the legal framework of the colonial regime had its impact on Indonesian society.

[dia 4]

Peace and justice within a democratic society can only flourish, if there is an attitude of tolerance between religions, both in terms of leadership and of the other members of the faith communities. The opposite is true as well: tolerance as such is insufficient, if peace, justice and democracy are lacking. In other words, tolerance is no absolute value: it has its limitations, due to such other values. Real tolerance is costly; it implies commitment and solidarity.

Cheap tolerance is in fact: indifference. It is the kind of tolerance that avoids meeting the 'other'. It is easy to be tolerant towards people of another religion – or race, or sexual preference, for that sake – if they are nearly invisible, as it was the case until about fifty years ago in the Netherlands: the number of Muslims was very small. Most of them belonged to those Moluccans that had served in the Dutch colonial army, and that had come to the Netherlands after the Second World War and the independence of Indonesia. As a small minority they were in no way seen as a threat. Tolerance was cheap. It was only in the nineteen-sixties that this started to change, with the coming of hundreds of thousands of Muslim people from Turkey and Morocco. Nowadays, we find mosques in all major cities and many smaller places. Newspapers write about Islam issues every day. Muslims cannot be ignored. And still it is cheap to be tolerant if you live in a monocultural white area (like I do).

What is the price of sincere tolerance? What makes real tolerance costly? From this perspective, I want to reflect in this contribution on some of the articles in the Proceedings of the conference.

When I read through those of the original papers that were available to me, it struck me that there are only very few explicit references to the costliness of tolerance, although as much as all contributions reflect on what tolerance is. However, most of the articles make it very clear that tolerance is not easy. It costs, indeed. Let me highlight some important aspects.

[dia 5]

Rachel Iwamony

Rachel Iwamony speaks about the relation between tolerance and cooperation. Cooperation brings people to work closer together in order to reach the common goal, but it does not help people to be aware, to respect, and to manage diversity which exists in our daily life. Tolerance evokes people to cope with one's own ego and to step forward to share life with others. However, tolerance does not exist by itself. It is shaped and informed by social education. In the Moluccas people go to the informal social education which is governed by their local proverb *ale rasa beta rasa* or I feel what you feel. It is this aspect of 'coping with one's own ego' that indicates the cost of tolerance.

[dia 6]

M. Alipour

M. Alipour discusses the issue of trans-sexual sex-change operations. Traditional Muslim scholars used to regard such operations as sinful, hence prohibited (*haram*). But in the late 1980's, sex-change operations were legalized (*halal*) in sharia and/or in state law by a Fatwa of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, and al-sheikh Tantawi in Egypt. In Alipour's view, this Fatwa should be considered as a tolerant perspective of Islam towards trans-sexual Muslims. Ayatollah Khomeini and al-sheikh Tantawi whilst following the traditional method of Ijtihad, in fact realized its potency by producing an

enlightened fatwa. *Ijtihad*, the hermeneutics of the tradition, can adapt to cultural conditions, which inevitably change over the passage of time and variation in place. This rule makes the Islamic sharia laws flexible over time and space or, in general, across cultures. According to Alipour, the same direction could be applied to other new subjects, such as homosexuality and bisexuality.

[dia 7]

Rachel Iwamony and M. Alipour

Both Rachel Iwamony and M. Alipour refer to the definitions of 'tolerance' as presented in the *Cambridge Dictionary*.¹ Tolerance is a) the willingness to accept feelings, habits, or beliefs that are different from your own, and b) the ability to accept, experience, or survive something harmful or unpleasant. In other words: tolerance has to do with what we want (willingness) and with what we can (ability). Do we want to accept habits and beliefs that are strange to us, and are we able to do so, even if they are 'harmful or unpleasant'. Are we willing and able to accept Muslims, if this includes that we hear the muezzin calling for prayers five times a day? Are we willing and able to accept Christians, if this includes that we are confronted with dressing styles that are annoying, if not offensive? And so on. Yes, tolerance has a price: at least it requires a degree of self-control.

[dia 8]

Ge Speelman

Ge Speelman also deals with the concept of tolerance as such. With Rainer Forst, she distinguishes three aspects. First, tolerance implies that people have to deal with the ideas or practices that are in an important sense wrong or false. Second, there are certain positive reasons that trump the negative judgment in this particular context. And third, this does not imply that one should tolerate everything. There are instances in time or context where the reasons for rejection become stronger than the reasons for acceptance. For instance, we do not tolerate racism, antisemitism, or child pornography.

With Paul Ricoeur, she makes a distinction between institutional and personal tolerance. From a personal perspective, tolerance means 'an attitude which consists of permitting someone else a way of thinking or acting which is different from what one would think or do oneself'. It is based on respect for the liberty of the other as a person to have his own beliefs. You do not respect the contents of the (maybe wrong) beliefs of the other, but you respect the other as a person.

From an institutional, e.g. political perspective, tolerance can be defined as: 'to tolerate something by not forbidding it or demanding it, although one would have the power to do so'. This creates liberty, rooted in justice. Both tolerance of the state and individual tolerance are rooted in the value of equality. Against this background, Ge Speelman writes about the Dutch multicultural society, with its clashes over the exact meaning of values like equality and freedom in the postmodern era.

[dia 9]

Leo Koffeman

This brings me to my own contribution in the Proceedings which also deals with institutional tolerance. It gives a historical perspective on the Netherlands. About one hundred years ago, the political landscape in my country was complicated: four minorities – Roman Catholics, (orthodox) Reformed protestants, social-democrats and to some extent also liberals – had to find ways to live

¹ Cambridge Dictionary, (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 1365.

and work together politically, in spite of their opposite interests and convictions. Liberals and social democrats, together the so-called 'left wing parties' wanted to introduce general voting rights for all adult male and female citizens. The confessional 'right wing' strived for the funding of confessional private schools by the government on the same footing as public schools. None of those wings could attain the necessary majority to change the Constitution without help from the other wing. After the 1913 elections, they in fact exchanged interests: the left wing obtained universal suffrage, the right wing obtained the equal funding of private and public schools. This solution would become characteristic of the way tolerance is being strived for in the Netherlands. The idea was given up that a nation could only exist if everybody was the same: it is sufficient to accept dissension and to treat each other in a peaceful way. Costly tolerance presupposes the willingness to accept people fully, despite deeply rooted differences in worldview and religion, if these differences do not lead to violence. It is costly because it implies a degree of self-restraint: I cannot always get it my way. Self-restraint, not out of fear for retaliation, but out of respect for people with other religious views. Unfortunately, it is exactly the risk of retaliation that nowadays burdens a free public discourse about the need of self-restraint.

[dia 10]

Gerrit Singgih

A very different approach is presented by Gerrit Singgih. He develops his understanding of what tolerance is against the background of a pluralistic view of religion as made by Raymundo Panikkar. Panikkar says: 'Each religion has unique features and incommensurable insights, because the very nature of truth is pluralistic'. Only if we are prepared to accept the otherness of the other religion, can we really say that there is religious plurality and that we are part of it. Without pluralism, the other is either mentally weak or morally bad. In either case we must take action and not just tolerate the other. Religious conflicts can only be handled reasonably if we assume that the other is also a source of understanding and that dreadful consequences will not follow. A real tolerance, and not just coping with the other, can only be justified if pluralism is the factual structure of reality. So far Pannikar.

Singgih points out that this is certainly reasonable, but rationality alone is not enough (something that Panikkar himself acknowledges). Reality has other dimensions than rationality. Singgih then focuses on the role of common suffering in furthering tolerance. Sometimes, e.g. in the case of natural disasters, people, Muslims as well as Christians, suffer – simply because of human vulnerability. People are vulnerable, and their religions are vulnerable as well. No religion has an answer for everything and especially for suffering caused by natural disasters. Confronted with disasters, words of religion are like blunted swords. This awareness in turn may generate genuine tolerance. So far Singgih. In my words: tolerance is costly, because it is based on the experience of human vulnerability. That's certainly no cheap tolerance.

Singgih also point to the importance of Pancasila in this respect. The awareness of pluralism can drive people towards conflict. That means that we need a pluralistic understanding of Pancasila. A real tolerance, beyond just coping with the other, can only be justified if pluralism is the factual structure of reality, like it is with Pancasila.

[dia 11]

Yaser Ellethy

This brings me to a theme that might be at the heart of the issue of the costliness of tolerance. It is being dealt with in the contributions of Yaser Ellethy, Klaas Spronk, and Amin Abdullah. It regards the role of holy books like Tenach, the Bible and the Qur'an. Real tolerance is only possible if we have the courage to read such books in a different way. And courage is not cheap at all.

As a Muslim theologian, Yaser Ellethy has presented a Qur'anic perspective on the 'otherness' of people of other religions. If I understand him correctly, there is a long tradition within the Islamic exegetic literature that says that Qur'an verses that could be interpreted as in favor of tolerance should be abrogated by the anti-tolerance verses we can also find in the Qur'an, and more in particular by the so-called Sword Verse (Sura 9:5). Such classical traditions were reproduced in Muslim literature for centuries, echoing a single fixed ruling of fighting which abrogates numerous rulings of peaceful and tolerant treatment. However, as Yaser Ellethy says, Al-Tabari, the father of the *tafs-ir* literature, disagrees lucidly and utterly with this approach. In his very learned article, Ellethy gives many examples and arguments to support his claim that the position of Al-Tabari is the preferable one. He concludes: "Whether the Golden Rule teaches: 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,' or 'it is good to benefit others and evil to harm them,' this is what pluralism really implies, and it may probably constitute a better and more comprehensive understanding of religious diversity and 'otherness'".

[dia 12]

Amin Abdullah

Amin Abdullah also deals with the issue from a Muslim perspective. With a view to the analysis of the issues of divinity, deity and humanity in Islam and Christianity, he discusses contemporary models of reading several clusters of Qur'anic verses. Abdullah distinguishes two large groups of Qur'anic verses of which each group is as a matter of fact mutually interrelated and interconnected, and has spirits of dialogue and criticism. Group One consists of several clusters of Qur'anic verses that explain religious diversity and the dynamics of relations between faiths, especially of Islam and Christianity. Group Two is the 'final' answer of the Qur'an against the theological-sociological reality of the religions, including theological debate that still continues today. According to Abdullah, the relations between Group One and Group Two cannot be read or interpreted partially, fragmentarily and selectively. They should be read comprehensively, and in interconnected and interrelated manners as a whole. He speaks of a System approach, not an abrogation approach type of reading text. These methods help us to analyse difficult issues with new perspectives in accordance with the development of human cognition and civilization. Religious understandings are not just to survive in the fortress of exclusiveness or superiority of the old rigidity, but in an inclusive climate people will be willing to accept input from the development of universal human patterns of thought that continue to evolve in accordance with the development of science, culture and civilization. Dialogue in any field of religion requires a new and fresh scientific mentality, a fresh *ijtihad* and new way of thinking religiously.

[dia 13]

Klaas Spronk

From a Christian perspective, Klaas Spronk has a similar approach. In the Bible, and particularly in the Old Testament, we can find many texts that suggest that the one God supports and even requires violence. Many see this as inherent to monotheism: the inherent intolerance towards believers in the wrong gods has caused much bloodshed. Spronk comments: "Perhaps is better to stop trying to defend or get in one way or another some kind of positive meaning out of all the texts which so are

so clearly filled with violence in the name of the one god. On the other hand, this does not have to be the last word in this matter. (...) [b]elief in the one God can also inspire to leave room for new, critical and hopeful view on things. Despite the fact that the belief in the one God, especially when it was combined with power or fear, often lead to intolerance and violence, there is also a counter movement. There are also traces of a strong spirit of peace coming from the same one God. They can be found in these old canonical texts, although they are sometimes hidden or only visible at the margins. They are like cracks letting the light of tolerance and peace getting in". He concludes: "Nevertheless, there are indications – we could call them cracks in the system – that the one God is broader minded in this regard than many religious hardliners see Him or would like Him to be. In the ongoing discussions about the relation between (monotheistic) religion and violence, focusing on these cracks in the holy scriptures will help to let more light of tolerance come in".

[dia 14]

Summary and conclusion

We have seen several definitions and descriptions of what makes tolerance costly. Some of the authors focus on the personal level of life. It is a matter of 'coping with one's own ego' (*Rachel Iwamony*), it requires 'the ability to accept something harmful or unpleasant' (*M. Alipour*). In other words: tolerance is costly, because it is based on the experience of human vulnerability (*Gerrit Singgih*).

[dia 15]

On an institutional level, it suggests a society that 'tolerates something by not forbidding it or demanding it, although one would have the power to do so' (*Ge Speelman*), which suggests 'a degree of self-restraint, not out of fear for retaliation, but out of respect for people with other religious views' (*Leo Koffeman*).

[dia 16]

But what makes tolerance costly for theologians in particular. It seems to me that this is touched upon most in the contributions of Yaser Ellethy, Amin Abdullah, and Klaas Spronk. It takes 'the courage to read holy books in a different way' (*Yaser Ellethy*), 'a new and fresh scientific mentality, a fresh *ijtihad* and new way of thinking religiously' (*Amin Abdullah*). 'Focusing on the cracks in the holy scriptures will help to let more light of tolerance come in' (*Klaas Spronk*).

We all know that this can be costly, indeed. It is easier, cheaper, not to address such issues but to conform to the traditional views as supported by the vast majority of a specific faith community. If you don't do that, you may meet resistance, certainly on an academic level, but may be also on other levels in the faith community. Resistance in the form of rejection, evil talk, slander, and the suggestion of disloyalty towards your own community.

History, both in Christianity and in Islam, presents many examples of people that had to meet such consequences of a sincere attitude.

[dia 17]

It brings me back to Bonhoeffer. He paid the highest price, his life, in his search for a sincere life of tolerance, justice and peace. What would history be like, and what would our world look like, without such men and women?!