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Accusation of Sin or Tolerance? From Christian Thought on Tolerance

Abstract

The Catholic Church is very diverse. This is its beauty and value. However, this can also be a cause of trouble. Where there are differences, conflicts may also arise. Some are open and want dialogue and conversation with everyone, about everything and in every possible way. They are always on the border. They try to understand the world and reach out to it and read the teaching of the Church in a modern way. They advocate reform and radical change. Others are conservative – they care more about preserving the most valuable things in the Church along the way. They care about tradition. They trust the wisdom of time. They do not want to make sudden changes. They look at the past with respect and draw wisdom and inspiration from it, in order to act today. There are different sensitivities, different spiritualities, and even different needs. Can conflicts be avoided? It is certainly not easy and also requires mutual tolerance.

Keywords

Church, tolerance, sin, freedom, person, human rights, heresy, John Paul II.

A famous Christian preacher, Billy Graham (1918–2018), wrote in one of his articles: “One of the pet words of this age is “tolerance.” It is a good word, but we have tried to stretch it over too great an area of life. We have applied it too often where it does not belong. The word “tolerant” means “liberal,” “broad-minded,”

“willing to put up with beliefs opposed to one’s convictions,” and “the allowance of something not wholly approved.” Tolerance, in one sense, implies the compromise of one’s convictions, a yielding of ground upon important issues. Hence, over-tolerance in moral issues has made us soft, flabby and devoid of conviction. We have become tolerant about divorce; we have become tolerant about the use of alcohol; we have become tolerant about delinquency; we have become tolerant about misconduct in high places; we have become tolerant about immorality; we have become tolerant about crime and we have become tolerant about godlessness. We have become tolerant of unbelief.”¹

Pagans and Christians in medieval Europe were not as intermingled as in Christian antiquity. Within the borders of the Christian state, superstition and pagan witchcraft could still persist, but there was no pagan religion in the proper sense of the word. Except for Jews, all were baptized. The issue of the Church’s attitude towards those who professed other religions arose only on the peripheries of Spain, in Africa, the East, and Eastern and Northern Europe.²

The problem presented itself when the Church came to assess the crusades which aimed at converting the last remaining pagan tribes. The Church’s right to convert others by force through organizing crusades was questioned. The Church was often presented as the Body of Christ, in which the Church and the empire had separate functions while both being the organs of authority. In the 1073 *Register* of Pope Gregory VII one reads that the empire is more superbly governed, and the power of the Holy Church is consolidated when the Church and the throne are united by bonds of agreement. For just as the human body is guided by two eyes, which are its natural light, so the body of the Church is guided and enlightened by these two dignities which are united by pure faith and which constitute its spiritual light.³

Hugh of Saint Victor called the laity who dealt with earthly affairs “the left side of the Body of Christ,” and the clergy “the right”. These two sides of one Christian community have their hierarchies: the secular and the ecclesiastical.

¹ B. Graham, *Christianity Today*, 1959 <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/billy-graham/> (12.10.2019); Cf. Grzech tolerancji, <http://www.pbartosik.pl/2018/03/grzech-tolerancji.html> (12.10.2019).

² J. Lecler, *Historia tolerancji w wieku Reformacji*, t. 1, przekł. L. I H. Kuhn, Instytut Wydawniczy Pax, Warszawa 1964, pp. 102–104.

³ Gregory VII, *Registre*, I, 19, ed. Caspar, p. 31.

The order of intervention and action within one community of all people is the result of this duality.⁴

Blessed Ramon Llull in “*Disputatio Petri clerici et Raymundi phantastici*” (1311) combines the missions of the crusade while treating them equally. He says that the Catholic Church has, as is said in the Gospel, two swords: a temporal sword, which is a material one and a spiritual sword, which is science and piety. Thanks to these two swords, the Church has what it needs to bring all infidels to the path of truth. First, the pope could send wise and prudent people, who would also be ready to die, against Saracens, Turks and Tatars, and they would show the infidels their mistakes and reveal to them the truth of the holy Catholic faith so that the infidels would come close to the holy baptism. In the event of violent resistance, the Pope should use a secular sword against them.⁵

St. Thomas Aquinas, who was strict towards heretics, showed indulgence towards pagans. He forbade all relations between believers and heretics, or the excommunicated. He taught that heresy was contagious – “*haeresis estinfectivum vitium*”⁶ However, he gave general permission for contacts with Jews and unbelievers. He said that the Church had no jurisdiction over the latter. It should only judge them through secular courts in the event that, living among Christians, they commit an offence that justifies their punishment by the faithful in a secular way. The only exception was when pagans tried to influence simple and unaware people.⁷

St. Thomas Aquinas, as well as other scholastics, defended tolerance, but only in so far as it was limited for persistent heretics. “On the part of the Church, however, there is mercy which looks to the conversion of the wanderer, wherefore she condemns not at once, but “after the first and second admonition,” as the Apostle directs: after that, if he is yet stubborn, the Church no longer hoping for his conversion, looks to the salvation of others, by excommunicating him and separating him from the Church, and furthermore delivers him to the secular tribunal to be exterminated thereby from the world by death.”⁸ He even allowed death penalty in dealing with heretics.

⁴ Hugh of Saint Victor, *De Sacramentis*, II, 1. P. L. CLXXVI, p. 416.

⁵ Ramon Llull, *Disputatio clerici et Raymundi phantastici*, ed. Paris 1499, 85.

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, In IV Sent. dist. 13, q. 2, a. 3.

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Th. 2*, 2. q. X, 8, 1.

⁸ *Summa Th. II. 2. q. II.*

The principles inciting such behavior are summarized in the phrase of Saint Thomas that heretics are counterfeiters of real science. In the Middle Ages there were many of them. Of most concern was the resumption of Manicheism, under the name of Albigensianism or Catharism.⁹

It was argued that if counterfeiters of coins, who caused material damage, were punished, why should counterfeiters of souls be spared? This was the basis of an approach of that epoch which regarded agitators of erroneous teaching as criminals, and not only church but also political ones. Heretics of the time, such as the Cathars or Albigensians undermined the entire moral order of medieval society. This explains the glaring severity of the state and church authorities. However, one cannot justify the facts of excessive severity.

The Church's position on the political equality of infidels is based on the distinction between dogmatic tolerance and civic tolerance. In the encyclical about the State of November 1, 1885, Leo XIII stated: "[The Church] does not, on that account, condemn those rulers who, for the sake of securing some great good or of hindering some great evil, allow patiently custom or usage to be a kind of sanction for each kind of religion having its place in the State." The principle that must connect states and nations within Latin civilization is the recognition of the same ethics in private, collective, state and international life. Ethics must be one. In Byzantine civilization, the state is not bound by ethics, the state is to be effective, and therefore may be unethical. In the Turanian states, the will of the ruler is the law, not ethics. Still other civilizations allow a multitude of ethics. The common ethics of Latin civilization, built on the Christian thought, is based on natural law. It is important to distinguish "mala in se" (evil in itself) from "mala quiaprohibita" (evil because it is forbidden). Latin civilization seeks to ensure that laws, orders and prohibitions take into account natural law, are consistent with ethics, and that a change of law seeks to best align it with ethics. Evil cannot be done, even if written law permits it.¹⁰

In practice, the Church assumed that people were generally united in faith, and that therefore, in the conclusions regarding the theory of civic co-existence, equal principles and equal views should be applied to everyone. The people united in faith were simultaneously united in one head, in the Roman pontiff. However, when the society united in faith disappears, when various Christian

⁹ H. Masson, *Słownik herezji w Kościele katolickim*, transl. B. Sęk, Wydawnictwo „Książnica”, Katowice 1993, pp. 50–52, 166–171.

¹⁰ M. Giertych, *Świat łaciński*, Opoka w Kraju, 2016, no. 92 (113), pp. 1–6.

denominations begin to live side by side, when the authority of the Roman Church is not generally recognized, when large groups separate from dogmatic Christianity, legislation – whose task is to shape the way citizens coexist – cannot be based on one religion.

As to the coexistence of the citizens of a given country, a position of religious freedom was adopted, and equal rights were demanded for all citizens so that they can profess their religion in a way that suits their beliefs. This was not demanded for a particular group or person but for the general public. To demand religious tolerance, however, did not mean to defend religious indifference. It was only expected that no pressure by the state would be exercised. No one is to be forced to enter or leave any church. Belonging to a religious group should rely on freedom.¹¹

This can lead to the so-called cognitive dissonance, which is described in the theory of L. Festinger. It is a state of tension caused by simultaneous recognition of conflicting or contradictory beliefs. It is a state of unpleasant mental tension that occurs in a person when two cognitive elements that are incompatible with each other happen at the same time (e.g. thoughts and judgments). Cognitive dissonance can be called a drive, because its influence on the behavior is like other basic human drives (e.g. hunger, thirst, pain); it causes general mobilization of the body, motivates to behaviors aimed at reducing tension, and induces anticipative avoidance (i.e. learning to respond to stimuli associated with the appearance of a dissonance.) It is mentally unpleasant, which is why there is a tendency to reduce this condition.¹² One of the most common discrepancies is between attitudes and values on the one hand and behaviour on the other. When people realize that they are acting contrary to their beliefs, they feel the urge to restore harmony. According to popular beliefs, people do what they think. The theory of cognitive dissonance postulates that when in a situation of free choice, one acts contrary to one's attitudes, then attitudes will be adapted to one's behaviour. People think in a way that is in line with their behaviour. Cognitive dissonance can impair rational thinking. Anticipating dissonant tension leads to avoiding thinking about certain issues, as this could lead to the appearance of "unpleasant" conclusions.¹³

¹¹ http://msza.net/i/cz15_21.html (20.10.2019).

¹² L. Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1957.

¹³ E. Jones, R. Kohler, *The Effect of Plausibility on the Learning of Controversial Statements*, "Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology" (1959), no. 57, pp. 315–320. Cf. H. Hamer, *Demon*

A question arises if tolerance and faith in a specific revelation are compatible. Josef Ratzinger asked a question: If tolerance is one of the foundations of the modern age, then is not the claim to have recognized the essential truth an obsolete piece of presumption that has to be rejected if the spiral of violence that runs through the history of religions is to be broken? Entering the polytheistic world, monotheism necessarily raised the issue of idolatry – the worship of the wrong god – precisely because, disastrously, it proposed to distinguish in matters of faith between truth and falsehood. Polytheisms were not always so amicable, furnished with consensually interchangeable deities. On the contrary, wars among gods were generative of human fighting, too.¹⁴

Saint Athanasius did not fantasize when, in this context, he declared that the message of Christianity was to bring the nations peace that had never been heard of before. The source of all the light that Greek philosophy shed on the human mind, initiating Western philosophical exploration, was the ability to ask the question about truth. In monotheism one can find double fidelity – to Moses and Socrates– and thus also the possibility of true reconciliation between religion and enlightenment.¹⁵

A conviction that through the mutual adequacy of reason rooted in the Logos and personal revelation of the Logos we gain access to a broader truth in Christianity than that which we can find in any other way, is not popular. It seems that an “escape from God and his requirements”, which results from the skepticism that characterizes the modern time and is based on overestimating the paradigm of physical sciences, continues in the world. A concept that plays a mediating role between tolerance and faith is responsible freedom. Freedom is at the top of the hierarchy of values. It appears “as the highest good to which all other values are subordinated.”¹⁶

Although in the Christian ages the state was relentless in suppressing doctrinal errors, it played, nevertheless, an important role in the history of freedom of conscience based on truth. Thinkers boldly and broadly raised the question

nietolerancji. Nie musisz stać się prześladowcą ani ofiarą, Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, Warszawa 1994, pp. 106–122.

¹⁴ Cf. J. Assmann, *Moses der Ägypter: Entzifferung einer Gedächtnisspur*, München–Wien 1998, p. 174.

¹⁵ Cf. *Nietolerancja i zabobon w Polsce w XVII i XVIII wieku*, ed. B. Baranowski, W. Lewandowski, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa 1987.

¹⁶ Cf. J. Ratzinger – Benedykt XVI, *Wiara, prawda, tolerancja – Chrześcijaństwo a religie świata*, Wydawnictwo Jedność, Kielce 2005, p. 184.

about the so-called erroneous conscience. In this way, they paved the way for the modern thought that grants a subjective element its due place.

In his dissertation on morality, “Scito Te ipsum”, Abelard considered the morality of intentions. According to him, the internal consent has such an importance that the intention itself, and not the act which begets a sin, is evil. The intention is a source of acts, and depends on learning, through faith, the true destiny of man. Often you can and indeed should, blame wrongful deeds on the lack of knowledge. That is why, for example, Christ explained the behavior of his own torturers: “Father, forgive them because they do not know what they are doing!” Ignorance results in no real guilt. The same may hold true for many persecutors of faith.¹⁷

This argument led to the practice of religious tolerance, which was changed in the nineteenth century by the so-called liberalism, which preached individualism, egalitarianism, universalism and meliorism. This theory recognized the moral primacy of the individual over any claim made by society (individualism). It accepted the equality of all people and rejected all legal and political rules that differentiated the value of individuals (egalitarianism). It preached the immutability of human nature, giving secondary importance to historical contexts and cultural forms (universalism). It adopted the principle that all social and political institutions are capable of self-regulation and self-improvement.¹⁸

Freedom truly is a valuable asset, but only when it is related to other goods with which it forms a unified whole. This thought can be considered a critique of the eighteenth-century European enlightenment. Freedom also means having certain rights, but to restrict freedom to the rights of individuals is to deprive it of its “human truth”. Freedom should be measured with what the person is.¹⁹

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¹⁷ E. Gilson, *L'esprit de la philosophie médiévale*, Paris 1944, pp. 329–330.

¹⁸ J. Gray, *Liberalizm*, Krakow 1994, p. 8.

¹⁹ <https://www.deon.pl/religia/kosciol-i-swiat/komentarze/art,1226,tolerancja-w-kosciele.html> (15.10.2019).

Church along the way. They care about tradition. They trust the wisdom of time. They don't want to make sudden moves. They look at the past with respect and draw from it wisdom and inspiration to act today. There are different sensitivities, different spiritualities, and even different needs. Can conflicts be avoided? It is certainly not easy and also requires mutual tolerance.

In an in-depth interview entitled "God and the World" Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger said that we need great tolerance inside the Church, which recognizes the multitude of roads as something compatible with the extent of Catholicism; tolerance that does not reject even those roads that do not suit our individual tastes.²⁰

We need tolerance to focus on being creative in evangelizing. Church outreach should include all believers. It also involves seeking answers to the question of how to free societies from the spiritual crisis. So much needs to be done that there is no time to waste time on constant disputes. And the threat of intolerance is always real, just as a threat of dissonance between the programs and norms preached by the Church and social reality.²¹ Only when the Church itself tirelessly guards tolerance towards every person who belongs to the community can it play the role of a "moral opposition" in modern society within the ordinary pastoral ministry.²²

In the pre-Vatican II period of teaching about religious freedom, the Church limited this teaching only to the community of the Catholic Church. The subject of religious freedom was the Catholic Church as a preacher of God's objective truth. Other denominations, religions and beliefs as well as religious groups had only the right to tolerance.²³

The order and internal peace in the Church allowed it to draw attention to the errors and threats within the propagated ideas. The social teaching of Pius X (1922 – 1939) showed the errors of individualism and capitalism. Pius XII, the

²⁰ *Bóg i świat. Wiara i życie w dzisiejszym świecie. Z kard. J. Ratzingerem rozmawia Peter Seewald*, transl. G. Sowiński, Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków 2002, p. 67.

²¹ D. Tanalski, *Fundamentalizm i "postchrześcijaństwo". Ideologie katolickiego sacrum*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 1998, pp. 61–63; Cf. M. Bierdajew, *Głoszę wolność. Wybór pism*, transl. H. Paprocki, Fundacja Aletheia, Warszawa 1999, pp. 197–234.

²² J. Majka, *Kościół jako 'opozycja moralna'*, „Chrześcijanin w Świecie” (1982), no. 103, pp. 3–6.

²³ M. Stępniaik, *Religia w państwie laickim. Negacja – tolerancja – dialog*, Archidiecezjalne Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, Łódź 2008, p. 122.

Pope of War, John XXIII called Marxist party proposals “called them names”. Paul VI or John XXIII, as well as previously Pius XII, taught the same.²⁴

A significant change in the approach to religious freedom was introduced in the encyclical of Pope John XXIII, in which “the right to worship God in accordance with the requirements of one’s clear conscience and to profess religion privately and publicly” was recognized as the fundamental right of a person. This right has its source in the inalienable dignity of the human person, so the law of religious freedom has been extended also to dissenters.²⁵

John Paul II later repeated this principle many times. He reminded us: “Freedom is man’s most noble prerogative. Beginning with the most private options, all individuals must be able to express themselves in an act of conscious choice, each following his or her own conscience. Without freedom, human acts are empty and valueless.”²⁶

The Second Vatican Council recognized religious freedom as a right of every person and every community. The source of this right is the dignity of the human person, their responsibility in learning religious truth and leading life according to the truth they have learned. It taught this in the declaration of the Second Vatican Council, “*Dignitatis humanae*”. The Church later recalled it many times: “It is worth recalling here that the truth which is not always understood at present or is not precisely formulated in the prevailing public opinion: the right to the freedom of conscience, and in particular to religious freedom, promulgated in the Declaration of the Second Vatican Council “*Dignitatis humanae*” is based on the ontological dignity of the human person, not on some non-existent equality between religions and between human culture systems.”²⁷

Religious freedom is understood in two aspects: internally and externally. In the internal aspect, religious freedom is understood as the freedom of conscience, i.e. the ability of a person to make a moral choice in accordance with the dictate of conscience, thanks to which man can know moral good and evil, discover the truth and follow it.

²⁴ Cf. M. Stępiak, *Religia w państwie laickim. Negacja – tolerancja – dialog...*, pp. 41–45.

²⁵ John XXIII, *Pacem in terris*, no. 14.

²⁶ John Paul II, *Orędzie na XXI Światowy Dzień Pokoju „Wolność religijna warunkiem pokojowego współżycia*, December 8, 1987, no. 1.

²⁷ *Nota doktrynalna dotycząca pewnych kwestii związanych z udziałem i postawą katolików w życiu publicznym*, November 24, 2002, no. 8.

In the external aspect, religious freedom is realized primarily by manifesting religious beliefs in the foundations and behavior in the private and public sphere. They express the relationship of man to God and are subject to legal protection within the limits of the common good. It implies freedom from coercion to act against one's conscience or to perform religious practices.²⁸

Social life is associated with the choice of one content. There has always been moralizing or settling disputes; from the first authorities, fathers and mothers, through analytical authorities and mechanisms. Socio-cultural pluralism, which characterizes contemporary societies and is taken into account in the political decisions of individual countries, leads to increasing social disintegration, competition of values and beliefs. It is therefore necessary to take into account the common good by adopting basic universal values that underpin the foundation of social order. According to John Paul II, these values constitute the basis of all relations between people and no majority can invalidate them without harmful consequences for man and society.²⁹ This is why Catholic social teaching recognizes fundamental values as the foundation of social peace at various levels of life in society and in international relations.

The basic criterion for assessing the state system, in the post-Vatican II teaching of the Church, is dignity of the human person and human rights. This is an important element of personalistic concepts of social life, which should be organized around the principles of the common good, assistance, solidarity, justice and social love.³⁰

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²⁸ J. Krukowski, *Kanoniczne zasady stosunków między państwem a Kościołem a problem ich realizacji w porządku państw Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej*, „Wokół Współczesności” (2003), no. 1 (15), pp. 45–68; J. Krukowski, *Kościół i państwo. Podstawy relacji prawnych*, Lublin 2000, p. 91; N. Koshy, *Wolność religijna w zmieniającym się świecie*, Kraków 1998, pp. 56–58; S. Olejnik, *Teologia moralna*, vol. 7, Akademia Teologii Katolickiej, Warszawa 1993, pp. 291–294.

²⁹ John Paul II, *Nowe przymierze między Kościołem a kulturą*, Wilno, September 5, 1993, „L'Osservatore Romano”, Polish ed. (1993), no. 12, p. 17.

³⁰ J. van Gerwen, *Europa sensu i nonsensu*, in: *Europa jutra*, ed. P. Kosłowski, Lublin 1994, p. 294.

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