

- In: A. Bsteh / T. Mahmood (ed.): *Intolerance and Violence. Manifestations – Reasons – Approaches. Mödling/Wien. (2004) S. 101 – 108 (bzw. 113).*

## Can Active Tolerance Prevent Intolerance and Violence?

Ursula Mihçiyazgan

In view of recent international events, the question arises what we Christians and Muslims can still do in order to stop the spiral of violence.

This question is posed with a certain degree of scepticism, which undoubtedly seems to be appropriate: confronted with the consequences of globalization, even its advocates admit that there is cause for concern and that, thus far, there have been but few winners and many losers. The unequal distribution of opportunities to benefit from global networking is a matter of injustice that makes the older unfair inequalities even more clear to us. Tensions within the world community are increasing and have already resulted in regional conflicts and wars, but they lead also to acts of terror. Chances for a peaceful easing of tension are hardly to be found. In any case, I do not see that the current 'War against Terror' is likely to achieve a lasting solution.

Should we not demonstrate 'intolerance' of such an unjust situation? If the term 'intolerance' is not appropriate here, then this is because 'intolerance' (as well as 'tolerance') does not refer to situations or conditions. When tolerance is spoken of it always refers to a social, interpersonal relationship that can, in its basic characteristic, be described as a relationship between an 'I' and a 'You'. In other words, 'intolerance' and 'tolerance' can become a topic only in the context of a relationship, at least according to my thesis.

From this point of view it follows that peace in the world in our day is less threatened by the increasing gap between the rich and the poor than by the tensions between the weaker and the stronger: the poorest ones have no other choice than to bear their plight, as they are excluded from the social and economic relations that shape the world society. The fact that they – must – endure this has nothing to do with 'tolerance'.

"Tolerance" means "enduring tensions which emerge from the otherness of other people, that is in their reasonings, wishes, feelings, and deeds"<sup>1</sup>, while 'intolerance', logically, signifies a lack of willingness (or ability?) to cope with such tensions, since if they are not endured, there will be vio-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. definition given in: N. Mette – F. Rickers (eds.), *Lexikon der Religionspädagogik*, Vol. 2, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2001, p. 2132.

lence. To this extent, tolerance is a condition for peace, whereas intolerance tends to violence because there is someone who is not able (or willing?) to accept the otherness of the other – or even less to respect it.

It is generally accepted that tolerance on the one hand is more important in our day than at any other time, on the other hand it is also more difficult to achieve: global networking or globalization has made the world a smaller place, with the effect that different people are living closer together now. In order to manage this 'living together' in a peaceful way, there is a call for more tolerance, the 'enlightened' virtue par excellence. But can that really be seen as a solution? I have my doubts and I would like to pose two questions to illustrate my point.

What do we mean by 'living closer together'? Of course, space is given a new meaning in the globalized world. But does this relate also to social, interpersonal relations? This question is pertinent because 'enduring tension' does not yet mean 'recognition', it rather implies 'passive toleration'. And the acknowledgement of plurality is not yet the respect for the other as a person. Is it possible to respect one another without a relationship existing between the persons in question? If one assumes that tolerance is meaningful only within the context of a relationship, then it follows that there must be a relationship between 'me' and the other. By that the other becomes a 'You'. As the other is only the other from the perspective of the 'I', we have to assume reciprocity. Both parties have to accept one another – as partners in dialogue.

Is it possible to view 'intolerance' and 'tolerance' separate from power relations? The otherness of the other is constantly defined within the framework of cultural and religious plurality, not within the context of social and economic hierarchies, and therefore of inequalities. Yet it is obvious that someone who is in a position of power, and therefore in a position to define a situation – and this always means for the weaker party also, someone who determines the framework of their relationship –, can practise tolerance more easily than someone who is subject to this power.

### 1. Tolerance in religious communities

When we ask what we – Christians and Muslims – can do to reduce or overcome intolerance and violence, we generally start with the positive contributions of our religions towards world peace. Most probably all religions call upon their believers to associate with other people with consideration.

As documented in the reports of the Vienna Conferences<sup>2</sup>, both Christian and Islamic teachings lay the foundations for a peaceful living together. Both these religions teach peace and tolerance. They maintain that the call for tolerance is rooted in God's love of his human creatures, so that we are obliged to show respect and love towards our fellow creatures.

Why then do we see so little love among people today? Does this refer to 'modernization' and 'secularization'? Do these religious teachings lose their significance in modern times and/or within the secular structure of (modern) societies?

It is a fallacy to take for granted that in modern times religion disappears, i. e. that the process of modernization inevitably means secularization. By contrast, there are many indications that religion becomes more and more important.<sup>3</sup> Should we then not redouble our efforts to ensure that the peaceful message of our religions is better communicated and that religious groups who do not place this creed at the heart of their teachings should be marginalized?

History teaches that religion(s) have not only led to peace but also to violence and war. The more important it is that we do not start only from the assumption that religions make a positive contribution to world peace, but evaluate also in a critical way the very real power that religions exert. The argument that whenever religiously motivated violence occurred, religion had not been correctly interpreted or had been misused for political purposes, is not strong enough to really convince. Religion, too, can drive people into violence insofar as religion represents more than the belief of individuals and is not only a question of personal preference, but also of conviction and of having the courage of one's convictions, i. e. of confession. It does not only regulate the relationship the believers have towards a transcendental power, it also regulates the relations they have to other people. Thus, tolerance on the one hand and faith in religious truths on the other can open up a vast field of tensions: each religious group, in the light of its convictions, advocating living together according to its re-

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<sup>2</sup> Peace for Humanity. Principles, Problems and Perspectives of the Future as Seen by Muslims and Christians, ed. by A. Bsteh, New Delhi 1998, and: One World for All. Foundations of a Socio-Political and Cultural Pluralism from Christian and Muslim Perspectives, ed. by A. Bsteh, New Delhi 1999. – Here I shall refer to the second volume in which the discussions about the call for tolerance that had already taken place in the 1st Conference were continued.

<sup>3</sup> Not the Iranian, not the Afghan, but the US-American society is the best example for this thesis.

religious teachings can easily become intolerant towards those who do not (or do not wish to) live according to this way of life<sup>4</sup> – either because they call for a way of life shaped by a different religion or because they are convinced that people should live together without mentioning religion at all and without taking into account the normative influence of religion(s) – especially if these religions claim, or even have, the power to determine how the situation has to be defined.

#### Excursus: Religion and secularity

At this juncture we have to reflect more closely on the problem of secularity, even though in a secular state tolerance for all is presupposed, and the state can neither prescribe nor guarantee tolerance.<sup>5</sup>

Since the time of Enlightenment, confidence has prevailed in the West, that the principle of secularity guarantees the prevention of religiously motivated violence – religious wars – and a peaceful living together of people from various religions. Due to the positive experience of the outcome of this principle in Europe, it is now proposed as a model for all states and societies. A secular ethic<sup>6</sup> is expected to offer a chance to religions as well as to individuals.<sup>7</sup>

Secularity as a regulative principle for a state order implies neutrality towards and sympathy for religion as well. In other words, we find there in principle the acknowledgement of religion and religious plurality. But is it possible for a state to maintain the same degree of closeness or distance to all the different religions?<sup>8</sup> In practice, every state is in favour of the religion which has exerted the greatest influence on the history and culture of the society in question.

So what can be said about the principle of secularity in the world society, which is gradually beginning to emerge? Although there is no reason to speak of a 'world state', rather than of a living together in this world

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<sup>4</sup> Here I am referring to the 'indisputable' positions, cf. *H. Schneider*, *Legal Structures and Political Guarantees of a Pluralism on National and International Levels*, in: *One World*, op. cit. (fn. 2) pp. 191–258, here: p. 253.

<sup>5</sup> I would like to mention this problem here because there was a controversy about secularity and secularism at the 2nd Vienna Conference (cf. *A. Th. Khoury's* intervention in the Plenary Discussion, in: *One World*, op. cit. [fn. 2] pp. 122 f.).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *G. Luf's* contribution to the Plenary Discussion, in: *One World*, op. cit. (fn. 2) p. 128.

<sup>7</sup> But it is obvious that I can regard my religion as my private affair more easily, if I am sure that an intermediating institution – the Church – mediates in a way that I can rely on the Church ensuring the social structure to be appropriate to my religion.

<sup>8</sup> Is the 'Minister of Religious Affairs' a believer of one of them?

emerging from the process of globalization, yet, it can not be ignored that today the points are set for the future.

As *Khamene'i* showed<sup>9</sup>, secularity is also advocated by Muslims, if and insofar as the societal order is structured according to their religion and it is rejected, if it contradicts Islamic teaching. On the other hand, world(wide) society is clearly coming under the increasing influence of Western models and structures. Given this, is the resistance on the part of Muslims not predictable? Can believers really accept an order that contradicts their religious beliefs?

As is shown by history, believers have often long endured or been forced to accept an order of society that conflicted with the basic principles of their own religion; but, in terms of worldwide standards, this being tied to the margin of acceptance would not only mean a very insecure basis upon which to build lasting peace, but it would also do them injustice.

If we, Christians and Muslims, join together to find ways for peacefully living together, then we must be prepared to specify more closely what we mean by 'tolerance'.

## 2. Different forms of tolerance?

Generally speaking one can distinguish between two kinds of 'tolerance', i. e. a formal tolerance and a tolerance of the contents. Whereas the former implies the passive toleration of a tension, the endurance of the other, the latter implies the active acknowledgement of the other, my willingness to recognize the other as a partner in dialogue, as a 'You'.

If it is true that tolerance only becomes meaningful in the framework of interpersonal relations, then passive endurance tends rather to negate this relation as to its possible realization. In this case the other remains the separate one, does not become a 'You'. If there is a relationship at all, then it has to be characterized by distance and asymmetry. In other words: tolerance contains an 'othering' (and disparaging), in the sense of only recognizing the otherness of the other by concession; it can thus become a means of distancing the other.

In consequence, the formal passive form of 'tolerance' should be regarded as insufficient for peaceful living together in the global village. In

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. *S. M. Khamene'i*, *The Claims of Religious Truth and Socio-Political Pluralism*, in: *One World*, op. cit. (fn. 2) pp. 109–121, here: p. 117.

its place, we need active tolerance. Should we then jointly plead for more active tolerance? Rather than hastily agreeing with this view, which is widely accepted in the West, I would urge a more critical appraisal: perhaps the assumption that tolerance is only meaningful in the context of social relations is due to an entirely Christian way of thinking? In this case the claim or also the preference for active tolerance, in which the other is always already re-interpreted and sought as a partner in dialogue would be the consequence of such an assumption.

Is here perhaps once again Western rationality operative<sup>10</sup> with its method of appearing as acting from an entirely rational and logical approach, but obviously doing so in a perspectival and biased manner? Then my reasoning and arguing hitherto could be an example of how in a dialogue initiated by westerners "the scales are usually tilted in favour of the stronger party and to the disadvantage of the weaker side"<sup>11</sup> – how the West always remains in the right.

There are however many arguments suggesting that from an Islamic point of view the more formal (passive) type of tolerance is prevalent, whereas seen from a Christian perspective it is the more active type. Thus, as a result of my arguing, the Islamic understanding of tolerance with its recognition of plurality seems to be insufficient, but this is only since – from a Christian standpoint – the active form of tolerance is a priori defined as the only right one.

In order to avoid this effect it is important to deal with the fact that both, Christian and Islamic teachings, contain basic elements in respect of our relations to others. And to phrase it again differently: in both religions there are various perceptions of the general commandment to love, by which our relations to others are preformed differently.

Whereas in Christianity the category of 'thy neighbour' has outstanding significance, in Islam it is – as I see it – rather the category of 'the other'. Both categories can be related to the category of space: 'thy neighbour' need not be physically close but is close in his suffering; 'the other' may be close in space but remains separated by a 'fence of law'. Both concepts are relevant in this globalized world; the concept of 'the other' leads to

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<sup>10</sup> As to Western rationality cf. *M. Aoun's* contribution to the Plenary Discussion, in: *One World*, op. cit. (fn. 2) p. 126.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *N. Iqbal*, *Juridical Structures and Political Guarantees of a Pluralism on the National and International Level. A Discussion Paper*, in: *One World*, op. cit. (fn. 2) pp. 145–167, here: p. 166.

relativity, because for Muslims the acknowledgement of the different 'ways' is set down in the Qur'ān.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, the concept of 'thy neighbour' leads to universality, because love of 'thy neighbour', charity, transcends the borders of a community, it is not limited to members of my family or my religious community, it is also for those who do not belong to my collective. As a Christian I feel called upon to develop a relationship with those who suffer.

This is why I find the Western efforts to establish universal standards as expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as in the efforts to bring freedom and democracy to all peoples in the context of a Christian engagement for those who suffer.

Is this perhaps the reason for me to maintain that tolerance is only meaningful in the context of relationship? Do I, in consequence, define 'the other' a priori through suffering?<sup>13</sup> That would indeed be a difficult presupposition for a peaceful living together! It is all the more important to raise the question as to whether, according to Islamic understanding, precisely no relationship is assumed.

If we start from the English phrasing 'Intolerance and Violence' as the overall topic of our meeting here, we very easily find the meaning of 'tolerance' as determined by the Christian understanding, since the word 'tolerance' is of Latin origin. It would therefore be advisable to start at the same time from the corresponding Arabic term and to examine its semantic field more closely, since I suspect that we as Christians and Muslims have quite different perceptions of 'tolerance' – and by that also of 'intolerance and violence'.

Since I am not able to speak Arabic, I can only refer here instead to the Turkish-Osmanic term *müsamaha*, which can mean 'forbearance' and 'negligence'<sup>14</sup> as well; it does therefore not have the same unambiguous positive connotation as 'tolerance'. Nonetheless, 'indulgence' tends towards 'benevolence' and 'kindness' – and not towards 'persistence' and 'endurance'. Used as an adjective it contains also the meaning that there is someone who on purpose is overlooking the errors and failings of another person. Does this perhaps still presuppose the existence of an interper-

<sup>12</sup> Cf. address to the Conference by M. Zakzouk, in: *One World*, op. cit. (fn. 2) pp. 25–29, here: 26; cf. H. Schneider, op. cit. (fn. 4) p. 244.

<sup>13</sup> The reason why there is someone suffering – in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37) the robbers, that means 'the others', are the culprits – is in this context less important. May be other people are suffering also because I do not sufficiently respect their otherness?

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Redhouse Dictionary 1968.

sonal, reciprocal relationship? Definitely, a benevolent attitude of allowing the other to go his way and to realize his own existence. It also assumes an activity towards the other. And this activity is seen as connected to the concept of justice!<sup>15</sup>

Even I have no doubt that love and respect towards our fellow creatures can be expressed, in this way, I have, however, great difficulty imagining how 'forbearance' and 'kindness' could be integrated into a concept of justice normative for the global society. Taking the global networking into consideration, the key question would then be whether and in which way we can conceive of a relationship with the poorest of the poor and how this relationship could be guaranteed normatively.

To sum up:

If we assume that our dialogue also takes place under certain power conditions, then we must ensure that 'Intolerance and Violence' should not be considered solely in the way I discussed in the first part of my statement. I hope, however, that our dialogue will help us to identify the differences rather than overcome them. For only by taking these differences and indisputable positions as basics, together and in the light of the convictions of our faith can we find solutions leading to a peaceful living together.

Can we practise among ourselves active tolerance which for me implies equally self-limitation and giving space to the other? I hope that my statement can be read as an attempt in this sense.

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<sup>15</sup> As M. Zakzouk showed: "[...] not only tolerance towards people of another faith, also kindness and justice towards them is expressly required of Muslims, because, as the Qur'ān says (Sūra 60,8), this enables them to act justly.", in: op. cit. (fn. 12) p. 28.



## Questions and Interventions

critical questions on the Christian and Islamic understanding of tolerance

SCHABESTARI According to the point of view expressed by Dr. Mihçiyazgan, the Christian understanding of tolerance is based on the principle of love of one's neighbour and speaks of tolerance as its content. The Islamic concept of tolerance on the other hand is of a formal kind and leads to polarity.

My question in this context is, whether tolerance in the course of history has really been understood in this way, or whether the concept presented here is one certain interpretation of Christian concepts only. If the first is true, the question arises, how one should then understand the many aggressions and wars, which have continually been waged, based on Christian concepts.

Similarly I am asking myself with reference to the understanding of tolerance on the Islamic side as presented in the lecture, that here tolerance is one of a formal kind: is such an understanding only to be found in certain groups and at certain times or has this, according to the speaker's view, in the course of history continuously been the Islamic concept?

the model of tolerance based on love of one's neighbour is paradoxical in its effects

MIHÇIYAZGAN As I see things, I would generally say that the concepts mentioned are enduring concepts, characteristic of the whole course of history on the Islamic as well as on the Christian side. First, as to the Christian model of tolerance based on the idea of love of one's neighbour, this concept doubtlessly had a very broad influence in history, however as it were only in

a paradoxical way, because it also brought great suffering. After all, in the understanding of love of one's neighbour, the issue is not so much what causes suffering, but rather the fact that there is suffering. The moment I define someone as a sufferer, for me it is not only possible, but also obligatory to be concerned with the respective individual. I know that I am called to begin a relationship with him and to transform him, since this relationship does not leave him unconcerned. Motivation and dynamism of the love of one's neighbour means turning towards the sufferer. What does not become obvious here is that the definition of suffering is my definition and not that of the other. Defining how the other suffers, what the other suffers from, always means taking sides.

presupposing the recognition of Islamic law gives more room for heading another path

Seen in this way, the Islamic understanding of tolerance is less oriented towards the relationship with the other and towards the transformation of the other. In the *milla*-system – if this can be considered as an Islamic principle – the other is granted the possibility to tread another path. Of course the determining thought seems to me to be that the other accepts the Islamic law as superior. With reference to the recognition of the other as a person, Islamic tolerance, which allows the other to tread his own path, is relatively weak, yet it leaves to the other more possibilities to remain an other.

different understanding of tolerance

KHODR I think that in Islam and in Christianity there are two different concepts of tolerance. Linguistically, the term is used neither in the Qur'ān nor in the Bible. This is a concept of Enlightenment. Yet, if one wants to take up the term 'tolerance' and trace it back as to what it means in the Christian tradition, one arrives at the fundamental assertion that I have to love every human being for his/her own sake, despite their weaknesses, because they are made in the image of God.

In Islam on the other hand, 'tolerance' means something quite different. Within the family of mankind as a whole, Christians and Jews are considered to be *ahl al-kitāb*, People of the Book. They are not tolerated because they are loved, they are rather tolerated because they are in the way of truth. Regardless of all criticism, the Qur'ān addresses Jews and Christians as "Muslims" (worshippers of God). As such they have a right to exist, and in this respect the assertions of the Qur'ān are much better than the relations in almost all Islamic countries in fact suggest. The *ahl al-kitāb* have the right to worship God because they believe in him, because they are *muslimūn li-llāh*. In this way, if you like, the Christian Church is secular, because it does not scrutinize the faces of those who are not Christians. It wishes that they should exist, so that they can be loved by the God in whom the Christians believe.

relations between individuals and between communities

KHOURY To me it seems necessary to differentiate between the relations among individuals on the one hand and the relations among the different communities on the other. And I ask myself whether what Dr. Mihçiyazgan spoke about is related also to the field of relations between communities, nations, and states.

how far does tolerance go?

Another question is how far tolerance goes. Is it still appropriate where – as I heard myself – someone says: in the German Federal Republic there are two societies: the German and the Turkish; now they have to approach each other and mutually tolerate each other? Does tolerance really mean that one suddenly constructs two societies, which are then supposed to approach each other?

the task of the state in view of the plurality of the religions

Finally, when it was said in the lecture that the state is to guarantee the plurality of religions, in what sense is 'religion' spoken of here? In the sense of religion more strictly speaking or in a sense comprising also all the concepts of a socio-political order, which a religion can have and which, as the case may be, can contradict the socio-political concepts of a certain state?

on the personal level tolerance is different from that on the political level

GABRIEL I have the impression that Dr. Mihçiyazgan in her statement introduced the category of difference before the category of what all human beings share. People have *face-to-face* relations with one another, and there are political relations. In view of these different facts, I am continuing in the sense of the question Professor Khoury has asked. On the one hand the issue is how I shape my personal relations, in which I acknowledge the other, which also implies an emotional component – different to that other form of tolerance, which concerns the political level and which is necessarily anonymous. I would not like to class Christianity with the personal line and Islam – as this seemed to me to have been the case in the statement – with the political line in the sense of a formal tolerance.

the concept of the other

Finally, another remark: in the present philosophical discussion, above all in post-modernity, the concept of the other is used as a concept of culture criticism against Western culture, which is said to be incapable of recognizing the other as the other.

and the discourse on the priority of what is different and what is in common

MIHÇIYAZGAN In the post-structuralist discourse the conviction is important that the difference is not to be considered as something that is given, but as something constructed. Thereby every discourse on difference is always already an object of suspicion. At the same time the discourse on what is common to human

beings meets with suspicion: for what makes the human being a human being is but a matter of fact; for this reason there is no prospect to discover a truth in it.

These deliberations, which in my view introduced a new perspective into our thinking, result in the insight that in starting out from what is in common, the danger is always inherent that differences are overlooked and everything is levelled. And vice versa: in starting out from the differences, the danger is always inherent to position the other even further off than he is already. I am aware of the fact that with my kind of argumentation I am prone to this latter danger. Nevertheless I think it is necessary to point out the differences and to be able to think that the term 'tolerance' is most closely linked to the Enlightenment, knowing that the period of Enlightenment is a historical epoch in our cultural development.

In any case, interhuman relations as a fundamental form always have a central position for me, for the state is something created by man, not an entity from above. Therefore I am trying to conceive of everything that is living together primarily as a human living together and not as life in a state.

religious plurality and its practical consequences

Therewith I arrive at the question posed by Professor Khoury, what do I understand more closely as plurality of the religions. I think that today it is no longer as difficult to acknowledge the plurality of the religions

as it still was a century ago. Yet, drawing the practical consequences from it, asking what it means concretely to be really able to live the plurality of religions in my living together with those whose credo is different, this is for me still a difficult question. What does this mean for example in the concrete relationship that I am living with my next neighbour, in a spatial sense as well? In this context I am very well aware of the fact that for instance life in the neighbourhood ranks substantially higher in Muslim societies than in our societies.

That this concept of the neighbourhood is a different one and that accordingly also the concept of foreignness and living together with the foreigners really has to be taken seriously has nothing to do with my saying that within society there also is another society or a minority society within it. In the worldwide social context, the issue is rather how a living together that is characterized by these different concepts is possible, whether and to what extent they do not contradict but complement each other. At the edge of this question I am trying to think in a processlike way. This means

that I want the thoughts I do not think and the words I cannot speak to be illuminated by the thoughts the other does not think and by the words he cannot speak. As I see it, for this the dialogue is important, perhaps indispensable, in order to better understand these empty passages, these blind spots in what is our own, and from there together to create a common basis.

**rights of neighbours** T. MAHMOOD I just want to make a clarification. In the Islamic law of rights, the rights of the neighbour are an important chapter. Some authentic books of Islamic history say that when the Qur'ān was being revealed, the rights of the neighbours were revealed day by day in the Holy Book. One of the most respected Companions of the Holy Prophet is said to have even told the Prophet that the way God was prescribing the rights of the neighbour made him fear that the neighbour would also be given the right of inheritance.

**without making any difference as to the respective religion** The Prophet was in that context asked what he meant by "neighbourhood". The books of Tradition tell us that his answer was: "40 houses on each of the four sides of your house". This would mean 160 houses every occupant of which would be a "neighbour". The Prophet surely did not say that all of them had to be Muslim – his definition of neighbours included everybody – *mushrikūn* [polytheists], *kāfirūn* [unbelievers], *ahl al-kitāb* [People of the Book], and Muslims. This is a fundamental aspect of Islamic law on *ḥuqūq al-'ibād* (Human Rights).