



Dialogue and the Experience of the Other

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To tolerate is to insult. Tolerance must only be preparatory to open the way to mutual acceptance. ... True liberalism is acknowledgment and understanding.

Wolfgang Goethe^a

Abstract

The article explores the conceptual antinomies of the liberal notion of tolerance as the superficial leveling of differences of faith and ethical commitments to affirm the inalienable human dignity of others. In arguing that cognitive and axiological commitments are existentially grounded and thus intractable, I argue that genuine tolerance is to acknowledge and honor difference. I further question whether we are to “tolerate” what we regard as “intolerable,” politically and otherwise?

I

In what might be regarded as a commentary on Goethe’s sapient maxim, the Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig exclaimed, “the main thing is that we still must prove ourselves -- the test is still before us: The overcoming of mere thoughts of tolerance, above all the overcoming of indifference.”¹ In the best of liberal circles, marching under the banner of tolerance, “the Christian ignored the Jew in order to tolerate him, and the Jew ignored he Christian in order to allow himself to be tolerated.”² This strategy of studious indifference attained its most pristine expression in the German poet and philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s didactic play *Nathan the Wise*. A parable of tolerance, this play, which premiered in Berlin in 1783, projects the difference between the bearers of the three monotheistic faiths to be irrelevant,

of no consequence because they are -- despite their religious particularities -- first and foremost human beings. As Nathan, Lessing’s wise Jew, rhetorically asks, “Are Christian and Jew sooner Christian and Jew than human beings?”³ Indeed, as Rosenzweig observed, Nathan is abstracted from his Judaism, as is Lessing’s Muslim from Islam, and as his Christian from Christianity. They meet solely as fellow human beings. Their religious patrimony, grounded in the witness they bear to their respective faith communities, is accordingly treated as an encumbrance, or an ultimately trivial accident of birth. Hence, as Rosenzweig laconically observes, Lessing’s Jew, Christian, and Muslim “have no children.”⁴ As pure human beings, they have no progeny, certainly no Jewish, Christian or Muslim descendants.

^aGoethe, Werke, hrs., Emil Straiger (Fankfurt a.M.: Insel Verlag, 1966), vol. 6 (“Sprüche”): 507.

¹ Franz Rosenzweig to Martin Buber, letter dated March 9, 1924, Rosenzweig, *Der Mensch und sein Werk. Gesammelte Schriften*, Teil 1, Bd. 2: Briefe und Tagebücher (Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 948.

² *Ibid.*, 947.

³ Vgl. “Nathan: ... Sind Christ und Jude eher Christ und Jude, als Mensch? Ah! Wenn ich einen mehr in Euch gefunden hätte, dem es genügt, ein Mensch zu heißen.” Lessing, *Nathan der Weise*, II, 6, lines 523-526. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing Werke (Frankfurt a. M.: Deutsche Klassiker Verlag, 1993), Bd. 9:533.

⁴ Rosenzweig, “Lessings Nathan,” in Rosenzweig, *Der Mensch und sein Werk. Gesammelte Schriften. Teil 3: Zweistromland. Kleinere Schriften zu Glauben und Denken* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984), 452.

But surely believing Jews -- as Christians, Muslims, and for that matter believing Buddhists, Hindus, or Navajo Snake Dancers-- would protest that their humanity is refracted through the particularity of their community of faith and cultural sensibilities. Yet one must acknowledge that religious faith, especially of biblical or theistic inspiration, may engender intolerance.⁵ The claim to privileged knowledge often instills hubris, and contempt for other faiths. Indeed, historically the liberal ethic of tolerance was born of a resolve to contain the fury and wrath aroused by conflicting religious claims. If tolerance courts indifference, let it be. For surely it is preferable to the scourge of religious intolerance.

Hence, the liberal creed of tolerance poses an irrefragable challenge to men and women of faith: Can an abiding fidelity to the theological positions and values of one's religious community allow one to acknowledge the cognitive and spiritual integrity of other faith commitments? The challenge is perhaps more poignant when formulated from the perspective of religious educators: How is one to instruct youth in the religious beliefs and values of their community, while encouraging them to be tolerant of beliefs and values different, and perhaps even incompatible with their own? How is one to educate youth to have firm religious and faith convictions, while encouraging them to honor opposing positions? Surely, this challenge would be banal were tolerance interpreted merely as a code of "live and let live," or construed as a demand to dismiss differences between religions, to cite once again Nathan the Wise, as but a question of "color, dress, and shape."⁶

Differences are surely not always so superficial. There are often very real and far-reaching theological and axiological differences that divide various faith communities. It is from

5 This argument has been most recently raised by Jan Assmann. *The Price of Monotheism*, trans., Robert Savage (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

6 For a philosophical analysis of the principle of religious tolerance as represented by Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*, see Avishai Margalit, "The Ring: On Religious Pluralism," in David Heyd, ed. *Toleration. An Elusive Virtue* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996): 147-157. Margalit argues that *Nathan the Wise* is actually an "anti-pluralist story." He points out that the parable of the three "identical" rings is given to the following logical, mutually exclusive possibilities: "One is that the ring is made [of genuine gold]. The analogy to this is that the belief is true. The second possibility is that the ring if it is effective, if faith in it leads to desirable actions. The analogy here is to religious practice; a religion is genuine if it leads to the proper worship of God. The third possibility is that the ring is real if it truly determines who the father's legitimate heir or representative is. Here the analogy is to the question of who truly constitutes the source of religious authority -- more precisely, who from the three claimants for legislative revelation is the true prophet. Of course, there is yet another important version of the parable. A ring made of impure gold... is replaced by a ring of purer, 'moral real' god. This is a possible Christian or Muslim interpretation of the story, and the analogy is clear." *Ibid.*, pp. 148-9. Margalit's logical analysis of the parable, as trenchant as it might be, is of course not in accord with Lessing's intended message of the parable.

this perspective that T.S. Eliot exclaimed, "The Christian does not wish to be tolerated." If one takes one's own faith seriously, one must perforce demand that others take one's faith seriously, even if but to protest to being merely tolerated. Thus, Franz Rosenzweig voiced his preference for the medieval disputations -- in which Jewish savants were obliged to defend rabbinic teachings before an inquisitorial forum of Catholic clerics -- to the tepid ethic of contemporary interfaith tolerance. Taking his own faith seriously, Rosenzweig unflinchingly insisted that the differences between Judaism and Christianity are not merely matters of folklore and contrasting cultural inflections. In a memorable essay on "the phenomenology and dialectic of tolerance," the Catholic existentialist Gabriel Marcel posed the issue with particular acuity when he mused and posed the rhetorical question, "Insofar as I consider the object of my faith sacred, does not this prevent me from taking any action which would confirm the disbeliever in his disbelief?"⁸

From a similar perspective, the literary theorist and legal scholar Stanley Fish highlights the dilemma of a genuine multiculturalism by distinguishing it from what he calls "boutique multiculturalism" or the fashionable embrace of ethnic foods, dress, music, and folklore.⁹ Such a multiculturalism, Fish points out, studiously ignores the "core values" that matter most to "the strongly committed members of the culture" of the "exotic" other and that constitute the very ground of their self-understanding.¹⁰ A genuine or strong multiculturalism would, then, take cognizance of the core values of the cultural other. But, Fish wonders whether one can truly honor those values if they are fundamentally inimical to one's own.

Interfaith and multicultural tolerance is thus fraught with logical paradoxes, if not downright antinomies.¹¹ Are we to tolerate the intolerable? Liberal law, crafted to ensure the maximal freedom and thus diversity of opinion and practice recurrently has difficulty in drawing the lines between toleration and legal censure. The civic duty to tolerate and the moral injunction to oppose what is objectionable are often in conflict, if not seemingly irreconcilable. Tolerance has accordingly been defined as a deliberate restraint -- albeit conditional -- from summarily criticizing what one finds objectionable in the beliefs and values of others. But,

7 Eliot TS, "The Idea of a Christian Society," in Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1949).

8 Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, trans. Robert Rosthal (New York: Fordam University Press, 2002), 217.

9 Stanley Fish, *The Trouble with Principle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 56f.

10 *Ibid.*, 57.

11 David Heyd, "Introduction," *Toleration. An Elusive Virtue* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3.

again returning to Goethe's instructive dictum, one must regard this form of tolerance -- when addressed to inter-cultural and inter-faith encounter -- as at best preparatory to "mutual acceptance" and reciprocal "acknowledgment and understanding." From the perspective of the state as a legal institution, such tolerance is supererogatory, that is, it is above and beyond the purview of the law; it cannot be legislated. Hence, it is dependent on given inter-subjective attitudes, which the philosopher Martin Buber characterized as dialogical. "Every actual [or dialogical] relationship in the world," he noted, "rests on individuation [of human beings from one another]. That is its delight, for only thus is mutual recognition of those who are different granted."¹² Buber is careful to underscore that recognition is not to be construed as *eo ipso* approval of the opinion and values of the other; rather it is a sympathetic acknowledgement of the subjective experience of the other. A solicitous, dialogical tolerance -- through which one actively seeks to acknowledge and understand the other -- must thus perforce take its lead from a source other than a concern for civic harmony. As a positive virtue, dialogical tolerance derives its energy from a compelling desire to honor the existential reality of other, and perhaps at a deeper level a conviction that the other, despite his or her difference -- nay, precisely because of this difference (and this will be our point) -- shares some basic humanity with oneself. For just as individuals are all the same and yet decidedly different, so are cultures and religions. But dialogical tolerance would be misconstrued if it is understood to be exclusively focused on the subjective, inner reality of the other.

II

The dilemmas facing a genuine tolerance, of course, are considerably alleviated if one deems the "externals" of other religious communities and cultural as indeed but extrinsic, and unessential differences, and thus, in effect, adopts a moral and cultural relativism. This was Lessing's recommendation. In his parable of tolerance, neither Jew nor the Christian nor the Muslim are certain whether he is God's elect, that he possesses the pristine covenant. Bereft of such knowledge, Lessing's Jew, Christian, and Muslim are enjoined to humility, and thus to disregard the doctrinal and historical differences that divide them. In effect, to overcome that divide Lessing sought to remove the differences by urging a self-critical agnosticism and an ethic of cultural relativism. If all is relative, religious and attendant cultural differences are not worth a fight. This attitude leads to what has been aptly called a skeptical pluralism, and an "easy acceptance of

a heterogeneity of values and ways of life."¹³ This may also be characterized as a laissez-faire conception of tolerance. With the elimination -- often by dint of a sheer decision for the sake of tolerance -- of a clear ground of morality and religious conviction, one ethical system and set of beliefs are to be regarded as good as the next.

As in the case of the well-meaning Lessing, this form of relativism is prompted not merely by pragmatic, irenic objectives of civic and inter-communal tranquility, but also by a genuine humanism. At the core of every culture and faith, the humanist holds, is a common humanity and even shared spiritual sensibilities. Focusing on the essential humanity of the other allows one to dismiss that which is particular as unessential. Indeed, extending tolerance to the Jew in the person of Nathan the Wise, Lessing "abstracted" him from his Judaism. He became what later the Marxist philosopher and former rabbinic student, Isaac Deutscher would approvingly call a "non-Jewish Jew." It is the human being hidden beneath the façade or exterior of a particular faith and cultural affiliations who is to be tolerated. A species of this type of tolerance is what might be called "*ad hominem* tolerance," in which a pious individual -- be he or she a devout Jew, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or what have you -- is portrayed as being fundamentally a decent person, for he or she is perceived to possess such engaging human qualities as sincerity, integrity, and honorability. Intrinsic value is attributed to these trans-cultural qualities and implicitly granted priority to the distinctive beliefs and practices that define the particular Jew, Christian or Muslim. In effect, they are presented as exceptional Jews, Christians and Muslims. The limitations of this type of tolerance may also be illustrated by Lessing's presentation of the "good and noble" Jew. In his earlier play of 1749, "The Jews" (Die Juden), he presents a Jew of manifest integrity, social grace, and a humane disposition, and then has one of the play's protagonists parenthetically but tellingly sigh, if only all the Jews were like him.¹⁵ Unwittingly, he casts his Jews -- as he does the Muslim and Christian in *Nathan the Wise* to be exceptional, and, in fact, praiseworthy for transcending the constraining limits of their respective faith communities. Seeing the individual Christian, Jew, or Muslim as an autonomous and thus a trans-cultural subject, Lessing, the preeminent humanist, in effect ignores or at least downplays their distinctive faith commitments.

In some contemporary interfaith circles, there is a

12 Buber I, Thou, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 148: Jede wirkliche Beziehung in der Welt ruht auf der Individuation; die ist ihre Wonne, den nur so ist Einandererkennen der Verschiedenen gewährt... "Das dialogische Prinzip (Heidelberg: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1965), 101.

13 David Heyd, op. cit., 4.

14 Isaac Deutscher, The Non-Jewish Jew, and other Essays, ed. Tamara Deutscher (London/New York: Oxford University Press, 1968).

15 Lessing, "The Jews," translated in P. Mendes-Flohr and J. Reinharz, The Jew in the Modern World. A Documentary History, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 67.

beguiling twist to the humanistic leveling of differences, namely to regard the particularities of faith and value as essentially the same. Hence, there are those who choose to present the Christian holiday of Christmas and the Jewish feast of Hanukkah as two variations of a similar theme. But the two religious events are, of course, not the same at all. Their calendrical proximity, and the fact that both occasion an exchange of gifts, and that both holidays are marked by illuminated candles does not render them spiritually and theologically homologous. Nor is Passover “essentially” identical with Easter. There are, to be sure, more nuanced and sophisticated variations of this approach to interfaith understanding, represented especially among certain trends in the academic study of religion, stemming from the *Religionsgeschichte-Schule* of the early twentieth century which holds that all faiths, including so-called pagan faiths, enjoy a relationship to the Absolute. This is not a theological but a phenomenological argument, based on heuristic presuppositions of a universally apprehended Absolute or divine reality, and some core religious personality to which religious beliefs and actions are ultimately peripheral.¹⁶

To be sure, these strategies promoting inter-religious tolerance generally reflect more than a mere pragmatic accommodation or sufferance of the other. They express humanistic affirmations and a moral commitment to the ideal of genuine tolerance. Without gainsaying the overarching significance of this attitude, I wish to highlight conceptual problems inherent in such an attitude.

III

Humanistic and phenomenological approaches to interfaith and inter-cultural tolerance induce two distinctive forms of pluralism: A weak pluralism, which contends that all religions (and cultures) have some intrinsic value; and a strong pluralism, according to which each religion has not only intrinsic value, but each is of equal moral and spiritual value. Both varieties of pluralism, however, promote cultural and religious relativism. But if tolerance is to be more than merely a by-word for relativism, then it must, indeed as Goethe suggested, entail a determined resolve to honor the divergent beliefs and practices of the other, not as incidental but as a central aspect of the religious experience and cultural identity of the other. In other words, the religious beliefs, practices and axiological commitments of the other must be taken seriously. In contrast to the humanistic and phenomenological appreciation of other faiths, this approach to interfaith and inter-cultural understanding does not ignore or treat as incidental the content of belief and objective character of given religious practices of the other. It does not

flinch from engaging the other theologically, and to tolerate members of other faith communities it does not suffice with focusing on the subjective reality of other, bracketing or even dismissing as irrelevant their beliefs and actions.

One may even question whether the humanistic and phenomenological approach to interfaith and inter-cultural understanding is capable of achieving their objective. For by focusing on the interior experience and human qualities of members of other faiths -- the subjects or agents of other faiths -- this approach in effect detaches the subjects from the objective content and theological claims of their beliefs and actions. According to the subjective approach -- be it in the form of some humanistic essentialism or universal phenomenology of religious experience -- only human beings are strictly tolerated, not their beliefs and practices. One does not tolerate the beliefs and practices of the other, but only the subjects beholden to these beliefs and practices. Put differently, tolerance of the fundamental humanity of the other does not necessarily entail an affirmation of the other's beliefs and deepest religious commitments as intrinsic to his or her existential reality.¹⁷ Accordingly, one cannot demand of Christians to forfeit their conceptions of dogma as revealed truths mediating salvation, and *ergo* to claim that “outside the Church there is no salvation” (Saint Cyprian). Nor can one demand of Muslims to yield certain notions of Islam, such as expressed in Quran, Sura 3:18: “The only true faith in Allah is Islam.” Nor could one require of Jews to deny that the Torah, oral and written, was given at Sinai and that God thereby established a special relationship with the Children of Israel. We therefore return to our original question, slightly reformulated in the light of the preceding discussion: Are monotheistic faiths, grounded as they are in historical revelation embodying divinely disclosed truths, inherently incapable of genuine tolerance? Are monotheistic faiths inherently antagonistic to religious and ergo cultural

17 In this respect, dialogical tolerance would go beyond what David Heyd characterizes as a “perceptual conception” of tolerance. “We do not tolerate,” he argues, “opinions and beliefs, or even actions and practices, only the subjects holding dislike beliefs and the agents of detested actions. ... [Tolerance] consists exactly in the shift from the perspective of judging beliefs and actions impersonally to focusing on persons. Only human beings can be the object of restraint based on respect, which is required by the idea of tolerance.” He offers this perspective to avoid the problem of relativism. “Toleration of the practices and beliefs of other peoples and cultures involves recognizing the intrinsic value of the human beings who are committed to certain cognitive systems or who autonomously choose and follow certain systems of rules and values.” Nota bene: Heyd speaks of “the intrinsic value of the human beings” who abide by particular beliefs and practices one might find objectionable or at least alien; in order to affirm the humanity of their agent, these beliefs and practices are to be ignored or bracketed. The conclusion that Heyd draws from this conception of tolerance is in accord with the presupposition of dialogical tolerance. A perceptual conception of tolerance, he insists, “does not require any weakening of certainty, confidence, or commitment to our own beliefs and values.” Heyd, *op. cit.*, “Introduction,” 14, 15.

16 Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

pluralism?

A journal founded in the waning years of the Weimar Republic adumbrated a strategy for interfaith dialogue that might not only provide an answer to our question but also point to the possibility of regarding religious tolerance as a theologically endorsed ethical virtue. Appearing between 1926 and 1929, the journal, entitled *Die Kreatur*,¹⁸ was edited by a Jew, a Christian, and a Catholic. The journal sought to provide a forum for representatives of monotheistic religions to engage in a respectful dialogue that did not require the yielding of traditional faith positions. The name of the journal was chosen with great care: *Die Kreatur* -- translated as "creature," but the German has wider connotation, embracing "all living created beings." Under the sign of Divine Creation, men and women of theistic faith are to be cognizant of themselves as created beings and thus co-responsible for the care of the created order, which includes at its center one's fellow human beings.

Conceived by the Protestant theologian Florens Christian Rang, this interfaith journal was initially to be called "Greetings from the Lands of Exile" -- each of the monotheistic faiths are locked in doctrinal and devotional exile from one another, an exile which will be overcome only with the *eschaton*, at the end of time. Until that blessed hour, however, they could only graciously greet one another from across the cultural barriers that separate them. "But what is permissible," the inaugural editorial of *Die Kreatur* noted, "and at this point in history mandatory, is dialogue: the greeting called in both directions, the opening or emerging of one's self out of the severity and clarity of one's self-enclosedness, a dialogue (*Gespräch*) prompted by a common concern for created being."¹⁹

The Jewish editor of *Die Kreatur*, Martin Buber, explained that in such a dialogue one encounters the other as a Thou (*ein Du*) -- as an irreducibly unique presence. The Thou, he further pointed out, is not to be construed as some hidden essence of the Other, some quintessential core distilled from the Other. Rather the Thou is the whole -- the *Gestalt* if one wills -- of the Other. The Thou is beholden in the Presence of the Other,

18 *Die Kreatur*. Eine Zeitschrift. Viermal im Jahr erscheinend. Herausgegeben von Martin Buber, Josef Wittig und Viktor von Weizsäcker (Berlin: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1926-1930), reprint: (Nendeln, Lichtenstein: Kraus Preprint, 1969), 3 vols.

19 *Die Kreatur*. 1:1

through which the Presence of the Divine is also manifest. Dialogue thus differs from a humanism that seeks to isolate and celebrate the common "human" essence of each of us. In contrast, dialogical tolerance discerns one's humanity -- or creatureliness -- in the particularity, as Emmanuel Levinas would put it, of the distinctive Face of each human being.

Hence, within the sphere of theistic faith, dialogical tolerance finds in the concept of creatureliness a theological ground analogous to the humanistic notion of our universal humanity. But creatureliness is not to be construed as a mere synonym or metaphor for the humanistic notion of a common humanity. By virtue of a consciousness of one's creatureliness, one assumes a bond with one's fellow human beings -- or divinely graced creatures. One is thus bonded to the others not only by dint of common anthropological features but also because of a sense of shared origins, destiny, and responsibility before the transcendent source of life.

Because dialogical tolerance secures the integrity of each participant in the ensuing dialogue, it need not, as is often feared by orthodox custodians of the various monotheistic faith communities, threaten the certainty of one's beliefs, or commitment to the values of one's religious community. Open-mindedness and tolerance need not necessarily lead to a loosening of communal bonds, and a weakening of distinctive faith commitments. Indeed, dialogical tolerance may be hailed as a theologically endorsed ethical virtue, duly celebrated, as inscribed in the irenic motto of the European Union, "unity in diversity."²⁰ Indeed, it is also a secular virtue, as Hannah Arendt observed: "Just as certainly as all can be lost in [inter-cultural] discussions if we gloss over the differences that divide us, so too we will never enter into conversation if we are incapable of assuming the basic premise of our humanity."²¹ "For respect for human dignity implies the recognition of my fellowman -- or our fellow nations as subjects, as builders of the world, or as co-builders of a common world."²²

20 Adopted in 2000, the motto seeks to signify "how Europeans have come together, in the form of the EU, to work for peace and prosperity, while at the same time being enriched by the continent's many different cultures, traditions and languages."

21 Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, eds. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 161.

22 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1951), 458.

