

TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF MULTICULTURALISM BY STEPHEN R HOLMES

A theological account of multiculturalism might seem a strange idea: the very essence of the condition appears to be the lack of any particular account of what is going on. Rather, multiculturalism would seem to exist when Christians, who describe the world in Christian terms, coexist with Hindus, who describe the world in Hindu terms, secularists, who describe the world in secular terms, and so on. This is certainly true, but it is also inadequate as a complete account of the position: in a multicultural society which is more than an uneasy and unstable balance of competing groups, there must be some reason for those who are powerful enough to change the situation not to want to.

This reason may be simple pragmatism, as when a group appeals for tolerance in one area of the world or period of history where it is in the minority, but refuses to grant the same indulgence to others in places and times in which it has achieved dominance. The pleas of Muslims for religious rights in Europe which are not granted to others by their co-religionists in the Middle East, North Africa, or Indonesia is an obvious example; the present campaigning in Britain against faith schools (despite overwhelming evidence that the education they provide is simply better) by those who are the direct descendants, and indeed beneficiaries, of earlier campaigns against religious tests for education are another. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with such self-interested argument; the pursuit of happiness is not so much a human right as an inevitable part of the human condition, and there can be no complaint made against those who simply work to improve their lot. A Christian ethic might suggest that there is a whiff of hypocrisy in asking for what you presumably intend to deny to others, and recall the biblical suggestion that the people of Israel should treat slaves well because they had known slavery themselves, or indeed the demand of Jesus that we do as we would be done by, but it seems pointless to ask either Muslims or secularists to follow a Christian ethic.

What is it in modern Western society that supports multiculturalism? In part, I suspect, it has been an assumption that religious beliefs and cultural practices simply aren't important. For a society ordered by consumerism and the market, my choice of whether to attend church or mosque is as irrelevant as my choice of which football team to support. So long as I am a good consumer, responding to advertisements with acquiescent docility, neither matters. On this account, tolerance, the central virtue that upholds multiculturalism, is understood to be the refusal to accept that strong convictions have any place in, or relevance to, the public realm. Freedom of belief and freedom of speech are protected only so long as belief and speech are not intended to issue in (public) action. Those who refuse to accept this limiting of their convictions to the private sphere are branded "fundamentalists" or "extremists". "Tolerance" is extended only to those prepared to compartmentalise their beliefs, and "multiculturalism" is accepted only insofar as cultural differences are merely cosmetic. (When offending against such principles, I once found myself being informed in ringing tones that "You can't say things like that here: we're *tolerant!*")

This is of course a debasing of a robust tradition of tolerance that meant far more. It is a tradition usually claimed by the liberal and secularising strand of European thought, but its roots are in fact theological, and the present debasement of the virtue is a direct result of its loss of connection with these Christian origins.

There is wide agreement that modern traditions of toleration stem from the philosophy of John Locke, who is the father of so much of our liberal democratic belief. Locke, however, did not develop his ideas in a vacuum, but in the context of arguments for an end to religious tests within the universities, Parliament, and so on made by Deists and other freethinkers. The same arguments informed the *philosophes* and the anti-Catholic rhetoric of the French revolutionary period. Tracing a step further back, however, the rise of Deism owed much to the Socinian (an early form of Unitarianism) movements of two generations earlier, movements which had many roots in the Free Churches, and which clearly borrowed a rhetoric of tolerance from the mid- and late-seventeenth century discussions over the Commonwealth, and the imposition of the Clarendon Code that followed the Restoration. The Puritan and Quaker settlement of the American colonies owed much to these events, so there is a clear line of descent for American traditions of freedom of religion also, and for the concomitant separation of church and state. Going back a little further, finally, perhaps the earliest plea for what we would now recognise as “tolerance” was *A Short Declaration of the mystery of iniquity* (1612) by Thomas Helwys, pastor of one of the very first Baptist churches in Britain.

So, I think it is demonstrable that modern liberal conceptions of tolerance have their deep origins in forms of Reformed Christianity as espoused by Separatists, Presbyterians, Baptists and Puritans in the seventeenth century. This does not yet demonstrate any theological component to those conceptions, however: these groups were the persecuted minorities of their day, and their espousal of tolerance and the ideal of a multi-religious society could well have been just another example of the pragmatism I described above. Indeed, I suspect that in fact it largely was, originally. It seems, however, as one reads the defences of tolerance that were produced within that tradition, that the idea resonated with certain key theological themes, and so was elevated from a piece of ad hoc and somewhat selfish apologetic to an important principle.

Perhaps central amongst these themes was the sense that religious belief should not, and indeed could not, be coerced. This belief, derived finally from the doctrine of predestination, and so necessarily central to Reformed theology, was at the heart of the notion of a gathered, rather than a state, church: one could not insist that nation and church were coterminous; equally, when Calvin elevated the Kingship of Christ to be a central christological theme, it was only a matter of time before his followers realised that this decisively relativised the claims of the state over the consciences of women and men. Such reflections finally issue in careful and powerful theological discussions at the time of the Clarendon Code, such as John Owen’s consideration of *Indulgence and Toleration Considered*. Owen insists that the sole question is “whether God hath authorised and doth warrant any man ... to compel others to worship and serve him contrary to the way and manner that they are persuaded in their consciences that he doth accept and approve?” His answer is a resounding “no”, since all people’s religion is a result of the way God has been pleased to situate them, to reveal himself to them and to guide them (the predestinarian theme), and so to authorise another to compel religious practice would be for God to “set up an authority *against himself*” (the kingship of Christ theme).

Owen allows that religious positions and practices that threaten the peaceful conduct of civic affairs (“... moral honesty, civil society, and public tranquillity”) must be excluded by force of law, but insists that where this condition is not met, toleration of a multi-religious society is a demand imposed not by pragmatism, but by a consideration of who God is

and how he is pleased to deal with the world, according to the Christian revelation. There are good theological reasons for a society founded on Christian principles to welcome the stranger and the alien, and to defend their right to remember their own culture, and indeed to practice their own religion.

Of course, the history of societies which claimed to be Christian could be held to suggest that such principles have been more ignored than embraced. Two comments must be made about this, however. First, Christian theology has always been rather good at acknowledging the truth, obvious to any student of history or human affairs, that human beings do not always act according to their principles. This is no reason to pretend that these principles do not matter, but rather a reason to insist all the more loudly that they do. Second, the case should not be overstated: the worst excesses of intolerance in European history occur precisely when Christianity is repudiated (the first French Republic, built on secular ideals, produced the "Terror"; German National Socialism, to the extent that it had any religious basis, found it in neo-paganism; the Communist states of Eastern Europe, where the states that were most vocal in their rejection of Christianity (Romania, Albania) clearly had the worst "human rights" record). Again, the real racism and intolerance suffered by Muslim minorities in historically Christian states hardly compare to the persecution their co-religionists inflict on Christian minorities elsewhere. That people in general are intolerant of otherness is clear; it seems historically that Christian-influenced people are generally slightly less intolerant.

What, finally, would a society that was built on a Christian vision of tolerance look like? This is to some extent an open question, as the turning of principle into policy always is. There are issues, for instance, concerning the extent to which tolerance may be limited by the pragmatic need to secure the continuation of a particular society. (In the seventeenth-century debates, this issue crystallised around the question of the status of Roman Catholics, particularly Jesuits, who, it was thought, were vowed to unquestioning obedience to the Vatican, a foreign territorial power dedicated to the overthrow of the English state.) It seems to me, however, that it will be increasingly difficult to defend multiculturalism by pretending that religious opinions are private matters and so irrelevant to the public sphere: the end of this comfortable complacency, shored up for so long by the irrelevance of the churches, may be the most far-reaching outcome of the events of September 11 last year.

If this is the case, the survival of multiculturalism will depend upon the discovery of a robust ethic, an account of human flourishing that insists that the personal convictions, values and cultures of human beings are of more value than social conformity. Multiculturalism will only survive, that is, if the destabilisation that will necessarily arise if there is an attempt to permit and contain extreme or divergent views and practices within one society is regarded as an acceptable concomitant of a greater good, that of permitting human freedom of conscience. A sustained multiculturalism must thus be based on an account of the goods available to human beings that values freedom above security and conscience above conformity. Christianity, I have argued, can offer just such an account, and so can be the host culture in a successful and vigorous multicultural society.

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