

## LECTURE TWO

### **The Peace Church: Identity and Tolerance in Pluralist Societies**

#### **The Context**

##### *Pluralist Societies Demand Tolerance*

Plurality shapes the character of our postmodern times more than anything else. Pluralism determines all aspects of our societal life; it also plays into our church activities, in formulating beliefs, in theological reflection. It is not my purpose here to provide a full analysis of this fact, but to limit myself to some general remarks concerning our pluralist society before speaking to the more specific challenges of identity and tolerance in this era.

In former times, when people lived in agrarian societies, every aspect of life was somehow connected. I remember this from my childhood in a Mennonite colony in Brazil: the people on the streets were the same people I knew in school, in the one single supermarket, in the municipality, and on Sundays in church (there were of course two different Mennonite churches in the colony!). It was one homogeneous society. Today I live in a highly industrialized society in Germany, where the fragmentation of life has grown enormously. The people I work with are not those I live with in my neighborhood, and those I worship with on Sundays are again a different group. I sing in a choir with

people that I meet only there; my family does not know most of my friends, and so on. The world falls into numerous pieces, several small worlds.

This means that I live with people who do not share the same or similar values. Sometimes we don't even share the same religious beliefs, since many people have a different faith or do not belong to a religious community at all. In Germany we have a growing Muslim population. And in general we see a breaking-away from tradition all over. Belonging to a group or a community is based upon free choice, and sometimes undertaken only for a certain period.<sup>1</sup>

We might regret this development and speak of the "good old times" when life was far less complicated. But we should also bear in mind that this differentiation and separation of all the aspects of life are a result of a prolonged development that began with the Reformation era. The freedom to choose your own confession was only possible after a hard struggle, for which many martyrs paid with their lives. This was one first step to plurality. In addition, the Enlightenment moved the identity-building and identity-preserving part of religion into the realm of the private, and an ideologically and religiously neutral state came into being. The common ultimate point of reference, which could provide the basis for a consensus on definite rules to sustain public order, is no longer one religion or a monarchy, but reason.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, all post-secular and postmodern societies are determined by a plurality of confessions and religions. Separation of church and state, as well as freedom of religion, have become pillars of these societies. And we recall that both of these principles had been demands by minorities, including the early Anabaptists. In fact, I would argue that these two principles are intrinsic to the nature and witness of the peace church up to today.

### *Dangers and Challenges within Pluralist Societies*

Thus we Mennonites, the descendants of those Anabaptist demands, could be most satisfied with these societal developments. But my observation is that most Mennonites – together with the majority of Christians – are worried and feel more insecure because of the severe dangers they are now confronted with. In the religiously and ideologically neutral state we are left with so-called "patchwork identities," cocktails of identities that are a result of the free choice of what to belong to. Identities seem to become relative. At the same time the moral demand for tolerance itself becomes absolute, but it

lacks a sufficient rationale since it is no longer grounded in a clear identity – as in the time of the Anabaptists.

There is a second danger. It has been with us since our modern and postmodern societies have turned into multi-cultural societies. In Canada this might not seem to be such an unusual reality, because you have always dealt with this fact, but it is different in Europe. Since September 11, 2001, when Arab terrorists killed thousands by crashing into the World Trade Center in New York City, we are observing a growing nervousness within our pluralist societies. We realize that we have not yet become multi-religious and multi-cultural societies in actual fact, but merely societies where parallel societies exist side by side.<sup>3</sup>

In German cities you will find neighborhoods where only Turkish people live. The shops, the people on the streets, the travel agency, and nowadays also in the newly built mosques and on TV channels – all you hear is the Turkish language. These people do not blend into the German population and many of them don't want to. There is no need to learn German in order to survive.

Since September 11, since the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq that have taken thousands of lives and continue to do so, and since politicians in our Western societies make politics on the basis of fear and insecurity, people have become somewhat hysterical when confronted with strangers. At best they have become more cautious. A growing number of voices now claim that the multi-cultural society was just a nice but unrealistic dream and that more important for modern democratic societies is the challenge to defend themselves. This results in yet another danger that coincides with the first one of multiple identities: in the Arab world as well as in conservative Christian circles, intolerant fundamentalism has become a counter reaction to the manifold threat to one's own identity. There is a deep longing for clarity in orientation, a worldview that provides distinguishable categories of good and bad.

Since this fundamentalism leads to a readiness both to support violence and to a tendency toward uniformity in one's own community, expelling and discriminating the ones who are different, the whole situation we are facing becomes a strong challenge for the being and witness of the peace church.

**THESIS 1** *The peace church needs to clarify its demand for tolerance on the grounds of a clear identity, if it does not want to support blind fundamentalists on one hand or pure relativism on the other. Both ways*

*are contrary to the very nature of the peace church, since neither fundamentalism nor relativism is in line with the gospel message of reconciliation.*

In the following I will try to clarify identity and tolerance and the relation between the two, in order to avoid the simplistic slogans about “clashes” of different traditions, cultures, and religions within pluralist societies.

*The Ecumenical “Decade to Overcome Violence” as a Response*

When we initiated the “Decade to Overcome Violence: Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace 2001-2010” in the World Council of Churches as an effort to react to the ruling culture of violence (before 9/11), we identified four major themes that seem to play a key role in the task of overcoming violence. One of these themes is the quest for identity.<sup>4</sup> Whenever identities are in danger or seem to be threatened, a culture of violence is supported. This could be illustrated by the war in former Yugoslavia, in the daily news reports of violent conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, or the civil war battles in Indonesia or Northern Ireland. In our democratic societies in Western Europe we see violent attacks toward foreigners and strangers almost every day, even if the newspapers no longer report on every incident. These are illustrations of threatened identities.

Even the now globally operating terrorism could be interpreted – to an extent – on the background of this insight: Identities that are threatened or oppressed over time will eventually find an outlet in violence. This is meant neither as an excuse nor as a sufficient explanation for terror attacks, which provide no solution to problems whatsoever but only support the vicious circles of violence. It is merely an observation. Ongoing humiliation on the basis of the denial of identity grows frustration, which leads to the temptation of taking shelter in any kind of fundamentalism. And fundamentalism in the end will always legitimize violence.

Positive examples reveal the relationship of identity and overcoming violence even more clearly. Why is it that in some societies diverse identities can live – not only alongside but with each other in one community without becoming aggressively discriminating or violent? Consider the European Union in general or Canada, communities in which historic identities are secured

and strengthened. The respect of a given identity and its history, the right to live out this identity, holds a potential for overcoming violence because tolerance toward the otherness is being exercised by all. Being different is not seen as a burden but as something enriching. Loss of diversity and neglect of differences would be a loss for the whole society or community.

**THESIS 2** *The assurance of identity supports the overcoming of violence, since it liberates from humiliation and leads towards acceptance of the other.*

Should we call this tolerance? That would be too simple. Reality is more complex. The pure liberal demand for tolerance cannot provide the ground for a peaceful society any longer, if the rationale for tolerance is simply the freedom of the individual. This is the lesson we are now learning. If the demand for tolerance is not rooted in definite identities, it won't have any persuasive power in the long run. If the counter reaction to a loss of orientation and identity is fundamentalism, defined by intolerance, then how can real tolerance be sustainably promoted in such a context?

### **What is Tolerance?**

We need to come back to this basic question, since the pure moral appeal for more tolerance has become so general that the very word "tolerance" is almost lost to triviality. In the true sense of the word, tolerance is an "impossible virtue," says Bernard Williams.<sup>5</sup> Tolerance asks us to bear (endure) an action or conviction that is not only strange to us but incompatible with our own convictions.

In our daily life there is much that seems strange to us, but often this neither bothers us nor even irritates us. Either it does not really affect us or it is compatible with our own convictions – even if it is strange. Here we are not confronted with the challenge of tolerance. Let me use an example discussed widely in European countries. In some faith communities the believers, mainly women, are asked to cover their heads. Some Muslim communities make this an absolute rule for Muslim women. For years this was not an issue in Germany, since it did not affect non-Muslims at all; we are used to women wearing a scarf on the street, shopping or taking children to school. Even in our schools we are used to the fact that a lot of girls wear

scarves. It is “their business,” we have said. So it was not really an issue of tolerance, since our own identity was not in question, but simply a matter of accepting religious freedom.

However, the question of tolerance did become a hot issue when the first Muslim teacher wearing a scarf was to be sworn into her position (giving her the rank of a civil servant). This meant that a teacher who wants to wear her scarf on the basis of her own beliefs, and maybe even as an expression of certain political convictions, would educate my child. It is a demonstration that will affect my child. In this case we are indeed challenged with the question of tolerance. Can we accept this display? Can we bear it? The reasons for wearing a scarf are not acceptable for us at all. How can we tolerate this development? Should we tolerate it?

Numerous other examples could be found, arising not only between different faith communities but between different Christian traditions of the oikoumene, maybe even among different Mennonite traditions.

**THESIS 3** *The challenge of tolerance arises only in situations in which a strange conviction or action is unacceptable to me because its reasoning is not accessible to me. If this strange conviction or action is to be tolerated, the reason for this tolerance needs to be drawn from my own identity.*

### *The Dialectical Relation of Identity and Tolerance*

From these observations we might gain a clearer definition of tolerance and its relation to identity. If you are sure about your own identity, you will be able to judge what is acceptable, what is tolerable, and what is to be rejected. Only if this judgment is based on our own identity will we be able to tolerate the otherness of the other. With an uncertain identity, tolerance is hardly possible. On the one hand, it will lead to a general relativism – indifference towards the other, the stranger – that lacks any respect for the otherness of the other. Through indifference we are losing the capability to reason and argue. This is also why the demand for a higher degree of secularization, as we see in France, does not necessarily lead to a higher degree of tolerance. Secularization does not provide more certain identities, since the secular state can only demand tolerance. But this quest can become itself a fundamentalist demand and won’t help us much, if it is not grounded and argued for from a distinctive, coherent belief system.

On the other hand, the lack of identity can lead to a hasty rejection of everything strange or foreign, since this otherness is interpreted as an additional threat to one's own confusion. Subsequently, indifference toward the otherness is the result; it is simply not understood.

Recently the National Council of Churches in Germany, of which the Mennonites are a member, has adopted a new program together with the Jewish community and some Muslim organizations. "Do you know who I am?" is its title and indicates its goal. Very often we don't even know who the others are. And we cannot simply assume that they know who we are. Here we are trying to take up the challenge of indifference, enabling our congregations and the other communities to get to know one another.

**THESIS 4** *Real tolerance does not require weakening, but rather strengthening, the respective identities. The relation of identity and tolerance is to be described in dialectical terms.*

*Arguing for Tolerance from a Christian Perspective*

Religion is one of the strongest powers in identity building. Even philosophers like Jürgen Habermas admit this nowadays, after claiming for a long time that religion does not really play a role.<sup>6</sup> Religion aims at the whole person and determines the person to a full extent. It identifies the person as part of a community and instructs persons about their place in that community. Even more, religion informs us about the whole tradition, a story, a stream of stories of which we are part. It informs us through beliefs and rites about ourselves and our vocation. Thus we find ourselves belonging to a certain group or community, we realize our being in relation, and we no longer perceive ourselves as isolated individuals.<sup>7</sup> From this identification we draw our ethical orientation – especially toward strange and unknown identities.

This role of religion remains true even in postmodern times of fragmented identity and the breaking-up of traditions. Religious identity does not replace other parts of our identity such as gender, nationality, ethnicity, or family. Moreover, religion is capable of integrating these parts of our identity, because religious identity transcends all of them and interprets them.

If tolerance – this impossible virtue – as well as the limits for tolerance can only be justified on the grounds of our own identity, then we need to know how tolerance is justified by our Christian faith, in our case as a peace church.

Is it possible to justify theologically the demand for toleration, to bear a conviction or an action that is strange to my Christian belief?

To answer this question, let me make two distinctions. The first is the general question of truth. Religion is always concerned about the truth. The confession of Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior claims to confess a truth about God that is revealed through Jesus Christ and testified to in the witness of the Old and New Testaments. This gospel message is the creator and sustainer of faith. Therefore, faith is not a work of humankind. It is not bound to people, actions, or localities, but is founded exclusively in the experience that God has revealed and has been created by the work of the Holy Spirit (*testimonium internum*). Faith is thus not at our disposal (*unverfügbar*), as God godself is not at our disposal. God is the truth, not religion.

This *Unverfügbarkeit* (not being at our disposal) was the theological motivation for some Anabaptists to claim freedom of religion and freedom of conscience. It has led some Anabaptists to reject church hierarchies, as there can be no ultimate authority over faith but God alone as testified to in Scripture. No human being should presume to dictate a specific belief to others. In light of the truth of God, every historical, worldly manifestation of religion must be relativized if we agree that the ultimate truth is subject to God alone.

If we are convinced about this truth, should it not also apply to the religion of others? Should it not be valid for their confessions? Their belief is – like ours – not at their own disposal and thus becomes subject to toleration. We have to accept this fact. Otherwise, we would identify our religion, or the Mennonite interpretation of the Christian religion, with the truth of God. That is a fundamentalist approach. If we believe that God's Spirit is the giver and sustainer of belief, we can tolerate (endure) the belief of the other. (This is a different approach from the pluralist theology of religion proposed by John Hick and others, who claim that all religions have only a limited understanding of the one ultimate point of reference.<sup>8</sup>)

The second distinction is more content oriented. In Christian belief every person is granted a dignity of personhood by the fact that God has put himself in relation to this person and continues to do so. In creation God created humans, men and women, in his image. Therefore, we understand ourselves and our fellow beings as bearing that image. In salvation God has reconciled himself with all creation. In Jesus Christ God reveals how he is



God and how we can be human in the ultimate sense. Through this revelation we see how we rely on the love of God and how it enables us to relate to one another. This act of reconciliation, the story of Jesus Christ, is valid for all creation and is to be accepted by all in faith. In perfection God perfects every person (and all creation) into the one that he is, by his grace and mercy. All our guilt and offences will be judged and brought to order in the eternal reconciling word that belongs to God alone.

Luther in his *Disputatio de iustificatione* of 1536 calls this the “Tolerance of God.”<sup>9</sup> It is by this complete movement of the love of God that God puts himself in relation to everyone and grants the dignity of the person. This enables us to recognize in the other, in the stranger, the person created by God, loved by God, and perfected by God. This has far-reaching ethical implications. Of course, we will not be able to be tolerant like God, but we can recognize ourselves as who we are in God’s eyes.

The respect for the dignity of each person and the renunciation of any form of violence are ethical conclusions to be drawn from this faith revelation. We cannot give this up. It leads us to tolerance grounded in the center of our Christian faith.

**THESIS 5** *Religion is the strongest power in building identity. In the Christian conviction that faith is not at our disposal and that God is in relation to all of creation, tolerance is grounded and justified.*

*Tolerance without Limits?*

Are we then promoting unlimited tolerance? Will this not lead us into indifference, into “anything goes”? Some stories in the Bible tell us about the challenge of intolerance. We find there not only the moral demand to respect and protect strangers, remembering Israel’s own experience as strangers in Egypt (Deut. 10:12-22 etc.), but also many narratives in which the other – especially the other belief – is clearly rejected. Consider Solomon’s foreign women, the Baal priests that Elijah encounters, or the prohibition of mixed marriages in the book of Ezra. “Zero Tolerance” is demanded in all these cases, and clear-cut judgments.

But take a more careful look. Intolerance is not demanded because these others are strangers or because of their different beliefs. To relate to

the others in a tolerant manner would potentially lead Israel astray from right belief in Jahweh, and seduce Israel to idolatry. This is the crucial criterion. When the temptation to idolatry is reached, there is a firm limit to tolerance. Idolatry is not tolerable. If the supremacy of God – the God of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, the God who is the Father of Jesus Christ – is questioned because other gods are being worshipped, according to Scripture there is only one possible reaction for the people of God, intolerance.

We saw earlier that real tolerance needs to be grounded in faith. Here we see how intolerance equally needs to be grounded in faith. Again, there are numerous examples in the history of the church and in recent times. If the church is faced with convictions or actions that question the validity of our Christian confession in a way that the confession itself is distorted or becoming unrecognizable, the church must declare a *status confessionis*. The Confessing Church (*Bekennende Kirche*) in Nazi Germany<sup>10</sup> is an example, as are the churches in South Africa that turned against apartheid.<sup>11</sup> It wasn't the reprehensible actions that called for a *status confessionis* but the idolatry that "justified" those actions. It was idolatry that was discussed in the sixteenth century too.

**THESIS 6** *Christian faith does not promote unlimited tolerance. When tempted by idolatry, intolerance founded in faith is demanded.*

### *The Differentiation of Person and Work*

Is there a contradiction between the demand for intolerance and the demand for tolerance? Here we need to introduce a distinction that can allow us to hold together both tolerance toward all humans (founded in faith) and intolerance towards any form of idolatry (also founded in faith). I suggest we employ the distinction between "person" and "work" that goes back to Augustine.<sup>12</sup>

God's judgment over humankind is one of revelation and restoration. Through revealing and judging the reprehensible works of a person, that person is restored, transformed. The person's dignity is untouchable. But the person's actions and convictions are to be judged. They must be revealed and judged without reducing the person to these actions and convictions. The person carries the image of God and cannot lose this through his or her own works. (This is also the theological argument against the death penalty.)

Again, this insight has far-reaching ethical implications. Its most radical form is the demand to love your enemy. Through love the enemy does not automatically become a friend; he remains the enemy. But a differentiation becomes possible: the other person can never be reduced to being an enemy. “Being an enemy” is not manifested in the person but in actions that cannot be tolerated because they would lead in the end to idolatry. The person must be tolerated because his or her personhood is the image of God.

We can define the limits of tolerance on the basis of our faith, if it is absolutely clear that the person’s dignity is not at our disposal. Intolerance toward other persons is, from a Christian viewpoint, never tolerable. But toward certain actions and convictions intolerance is not only possible, it might be demanded.

**THESIS 7** *A differentiation of person and work is necessary in order to argue coherently for tolerance and intolerance founded in faith.*

### **The Necessity for an Open and Public Dialogue**

We have seen how the Christian identity enables us to argue theologically for both tolerance and intolerance from a faith perspective. In a pluralist, multi-religious society, the state has to be neutral ideologically and religiously. But this is obviously not sufficient to shape a society of healthy relations and free from violence. It is not enough, because our societies are not composed of Christians alone. We must acknowledge that all our arguments are only a contribution from this very Christian perspective to a much larger debate. But it is our contribution!

In the end the secular state must ask every religion to share their arguments, from their own perspectives, in the public arena. What is acceptable, what is tolerable, and what is to be rejected? In this way we will learn together how religion can contribute to shaping and preserving a postmodern society, and what we cannot realistically expect. Without the dialogue of religions in the public sphere, we will hastily ask for juridical steps when confronted with conflicts (like the question of the scarf in school). Juridical measures cannot solve conflicts, they can only regulate them.

Our open, democratic forms of government depend decisively on the reasoning of the different faith traditions, if a peaceful, respectful, and nonviolent life with one another is to be possible. The postmodern form of government itself cannot create and sustain such a culture of nonviolence.

Therefore, it is also wrong to argue that religion is “private business.” Religion always pushes into the public sphere and is realized in a public manner. If we do not allow it to contribute to shaping society on the basis of its beliefs, or if we as religious bodies such as the church refuse to contribute to shaping society, the consequence will be either a laicist or an absolutist government. Both will be unable to promote nonviolent living together, because they cannot argue substantially for tolerance. The laicist government cannot promote nonviolence in the long run because all identities are relativized, which will result in indifference; the absolutist government is incapable of promoting nonviolence, since it allows only one ideology to be valid (fundamentalism). Both forms are – from the perspective of the Christian confession – not tolerable.

**THESIS 8** *In the secular state, faith traditions are challenged to share their reasons for tolerance and intolerance in the public sphere, if the nonviolent co-existence of different identities is to be possible in the long run.*

### **Conclusion**

In the future, I expect that the churches, and especially peace churches like the Mennonites, will speak up more forcefully in favor of public spaces for a dialogue of religions. We shall help to shape these spaces for the well-being of all. Because it is only in dialogue, in a direct and lived encounter with the other, that we will find out three crucial things: (1) What we can accept, because we find it in accordance with our own identity; (2) What we need to tolerate, even when not in accordance with our own identity, but bearable on the basis of our own belief; and (3) What can’t be tolerated but asks for clear opposition, because the dignity of a person is disregarded and therefore the integrity of our confession itself is in danger.

Ecumenism is such a public sphere, where these kinds of dialogues can be conducted. Our experience from interdenominational ecumenism is that through reassurance of our own identity more tolerance is possible and violence can be reduced. Now it is time to look for such experiences in the realm of interfaith dialogue. I want to believe that the peace churches especially are looking for such an ecumenical space, and that they are qualified and motivated in a special way for such dialogues.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Peter L. Berger, *Der Zwang zur Häresie* (Freiburg, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant provided the most outstanding and far-reaching arguments.

<sup>3</sup> A strong symbol of this fact is the assassination of the film-maker van Gogh in the Netherlands, killed for his provocative movie "Submission," which alleges violence against women in traditional Muslim conceptions.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Diana Mavunduse and Simon Oxley, *Why Violence? Why not Peace? A study guide to help individuals and groups in the churches to reflect and act in the Decade to Overcome Violence* (Geneva: WCC, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Williams, "Toleration: An Impossible Virtue" in D. Heyd (ed.), *Toleration: An Elusive Virtue* (Princeton, 1996), 18-28. Cf. also Adam Seligman, "Toleranz – eine unmögliche Tugend?" in *Ökumenische Rundschau* 3 (2003): 283-95.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Jürgen Habermas, "Der Riss der Sprachlosigkeit" in *Frankfurter Rundschau* (16.10.2001).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Christoph Schwöbel, "Toleranz und Glauben. Identität und Toleranz im Horizont religiöser Wahrheitsgewissheiten" in Christoph Schwöbel and D.v.Tippelskirch (eds.), *Die religiösen Wurzeln der Toleranz* (Freiburg i.B., 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. John Hick, *God has Many Names* (Philadelphia, 1982).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Gerhard Ebeling, "Die Toleranz Gottes und die Toleranz der Vernunft" in T. Rendtorff (ed.), *Glaube und Toleranz. Das theologische Erbe der Aufklärung* (Gütersloh, 1982), 54-73.

<sup>10</sup> Barmen Declaration of 1934, especially Art. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the Belhar Confession of 1986. In the World Council of Churches we are now discussing whether economically dominated globalization represents such idolatry, as churches from Africa have stated in Accra. This *processus confessionis* has been initiated by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (in Debrecen, 1997) and will be a major topic at the ninth WCC Assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XIV,4.