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CHRISTIAN FREEDOM, TOLERANCE AND THE CLAIMS OF TRUTH

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Introduction

The subject of this paper is both vast and difficult. It is also one on which comparatively little has been written from an evangelical perspective. The issues which the topic throws up are, however, of far-reaching significance for the church as we move forward into a new millennium. The aims of this paper are modest – to highlight some of the key issues which need to be addressed in this area and to introduce some of the most useful relevant literature.

1. Historical Background

From the outset, the church has recognized Christian liberty as one of the most basic privileges secured for her by Christ. 'It is for freedom that Christ has set us free' (Gal. 5:1). This privilege is based on the fact that we are members of God's family and as such, when proper place is given to the lawful exercise of ecclesiastical authority, we are bound to respect the Christ-bought freedom of others. The church also recognized that its freedom was qualified by the lawful exercise of civil power (as ordained by God), but insisted on the right of freedom from political repression as long as Christians carried out their secular duties to the state. Tertullian, for example, ridiculed forced religion, complaining that among the countless religions of the empire only the Christians were to be denied their own. Lactantius argued that worship must be free and voluntary. Likewise, widespread adherence in the early church to New Testament principles in dealing with errant members (non-use of violence and the exercise of discipline in a spirit of charity) enabled the early church 'to win a reputation for charity and non-violence of a kind rarely achieved by later...Christian sects. "See how these Christians love one another", an observation first made in the time of Tertullian, became a commentary on their success and a judgement on their successors.'¹

With the granting of official toleration to Christians in 313 under Constantine and the church's subsequent increasing alliance of interest with the secular authorities, we witness the beginnings of the long and sad tale of Christian persecution of pagans and of fellow-Christians. The first

¹ H. Kamen, *The Rise of Toleration* (London, 1967), p.11.

person to demand the suppression of pagan cults, with appeal to Scripture, appears to have been Firmicus Maternus in his *De errore profanarum religionum*, written c. 346.²

It is, of course, Augustine's campaign against the Donatists in the late fourth and early fifth centuries that is generally held to mark the critical moment for the church's acceptance of persecution. When Augustine became bishop of Hippo in North Africa in 395, the church in the province was bitterly divided between Catholics and Donatists. He determined to end the unhappy schism by reclaiming the (schismatic) Donatists to the Catholic fold. At first he used peaceful measures, but when the situation deteriorated in the early years of the fifth century his attitude changed. Influenced partly by the persuasion of colleagues, partly by the violence of Circumcellion activity against Catholics and partly by the proven effectiveness of the strategy, he elaborated his 'theory' of coercion in which, as Lamirande says, 'Disciplinary measures against members of the Church as well as compulsory measures against estranged sons and daughters are equally connected.'³ The formula, 'Love and do as you like', Augustine 'regarded...as providing both a justification for the discipline of the erring and also a principle of great restraint in the manner of that discipline'.⁴ Contrary to some later misunderstandings, Augustine hated violence, strongly disapproved of uncharitable talk about Donatists by Catholics and never deviated from his opposition to the use of torture, the death penalty and to the enforcing of belief by physical coercion.⁵ Kamen, however, appears to be justified in holding that:

² An English translation can be found in vol. 37 of *Ancient Christian Writers*, ed. C. A. Forbes (New York, 1970).

³ E. Lamirande, *Church, State and Toleration. An Intriguing Change of Mind in Augustine* (Villanova, 1975), p. 43.

⁴ H. Chadwick, *Augustine* (Oxford, 1986), p. 82.

⁵ Chadwick speaks of the way in which 'Select quotations from Augustine's anti-Donatist writings enabled some medieval canonists to make him look as if he were justifying the stern measures against heretics adopted in the later middle ages.' He rightly adds: 'Augustine would have been horrified by the burning of heretics, by the belief, found not only among sixteenth-century Protestants and medieval Catholics but even in the medieval world of Byzantine Orthodoxy, that heretical ideas are of so insidious and diabolical a nature that the only available way of stopping them is to exterminate the propagators. In late medieval times people...appealed to texts picked out of Augustine's

by his appeal to the secular authorities for help against the outrages committed by the Donatists; by the way in which he wrested the phrase *compelle intrare* from its context in the parable of the supper (Luke 14:32), so as to make it read as a command to enforce the submission of heretics and unbelievers; and by his intolerant exclamation ‘What death is worse for the soul than the liberty to err?’ – *quae peior mors animae quam libertas erroris?* –; he established a precedent which fortified the practice of repression by the Medieval Church.⁶

It was towards the end of the eleventh century that systematic repression began in earnest. R.I. Moore has argued that in that century, ‘Europe became a persecuting society...’.⁷ Certainly from the last quarter of the twelfth century, increasingly rigorous measures were directed against heretics. These were given support by Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* in which he compares heretics to counterfeiters of false money. If the latter could be put to death because of the seriousness of the crime of corrupting the currency, those who committed the even more serious crime of corrupting the faith deserved no other fate.⁸ The brutal methods of the Inquisition in rooting out heretics were seen by medieval people as a right and necessary safeguard for Christian society.

Towards a Modern Basis for Tolerance

The sixteenth century gave birth to a new historical situation out of which religious liberty and tolerance began to emerge. The Protestant

works to justify severity, and ignored the numerous places where he wholly opposed torture and capital punishment or any discipline that went beyond what a truly loving father might administer to an erring son.’ Chadwick, pp. 81-2. It is significant that for over six hundred years, from the time of Augustine, there are no records of executions on religious grounds.

⁶ Kamen, pp. 13-14.

⁷ R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250* (Oxford, 1990), p. 5.

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2/2, Questions 10-11. On the other hand, Aquinas argues that the parable of the wheat and tares in Matt. 13 applies to Jews and infidels. True faith is exercised willingly; coercion is wrong because it produces hypocrisy. As Kamen observes: ‘On this basis, Catholics could and did co-exist peacefully with Jews and Muslims in several parts of the Mediterranean world.’ See Kamen, p. 20.

Reformation did not espouse toleration as such and 'in Protestant countries, those who did not accept the authority of the established Church were excluded also from the political community with which the Church was identified. Protestantism was not tolerated in Catholic countries, and Catholicism was not tolerated in Protestant countries. The right of religious dissent was politically prohibited. Nonconformists were persecuted as heretics of the church and traitors of the state.'⁹

During the savage Wars of Religion, dissenting groups in various countries found themselves undergoing persecution. Each sought toleration for their own beliefs not, at first, out of devotion to religious liberty as such, for it was simply taken for granted that the ruler had the right and duty to punish religious error. It was just that each group firmly believed that it alone held fast to the truth.

In the seventeenth century, some Puritan writers began to argue for religious liberty for all, not just toleration for one group.¹⁰ Of particular significance are some writings of John Owen¹¹ and Roger Williams' *The Bloody Tenet, of Persecution, for Cause of Conscience* (1644). In the latter

⁹ J. E. Wood, 'Tolerance', ed. W. A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1984), pp. 1098-1100.

¹⁰ In Scotland, the defence of religious toleration as a fundamental principle was slow in coming. Samuel Rutherford's influential *A Free Disputation against Pretended Liberty of Conscience* (1649) was described by Bishop Reginald Heber as 'perhaps the most elaborate defence of persecution which has ever appeared in a Protestant country'. Quoted in ed. D. G. Mullan, *Religious Pluralism in the West: An Anthology* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 141-2. Chapter Four of Rutherford's *A Free Disputation...*, 'The State of the Question of Compulsion of Conscience, and Tolleration', is found in Mullan, pp. 142-52. Bruce and Wright chart the slow and painful movement in Scotland on this issue. For example, they show that, 'Despite having begun as firm believers in religious coercion, the Secession and the Free Church gradually came to argue for religious toleration, first in defence of their own rights, then of the rights of dissenters generally, and finally in defence of the value of the general principle.' S. Bruce and C. Wright, 'Law, Social Change, and Religious Toleration', *Journal of Church and State* 37 (1995), p. 107.

¹¹ See his 'Indulgence and Toleration Considered' (1667), *Works*, vol. 13 (London, 1850-53), pp. 517-40, and other writings in the same volume.

work, Williams argues 'that no man should be prevented from worshipping as his conscience directed him'. Neither should anyone 'be compelled to worship against his conscience or to contribute to the support of a worship his conscience disapproved'.¹² As Clements comments: 'Tolerance for them was a virtue born of confidence in the ability of the Truth to vindicate itself without instruments of state coercion. It reflected too their high view of the dignity of man and of the trans-political nature of the kingdom of God.'¹³ This Puritan understanding was not, however, destined to provide the basis for the modern policy of toleration in the West.

One of the most seminal figures in the emerging modern world was the English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704). Along with other thinkers like Spinoza and, later, John Stuart Mill, he developed the metaphysical dualism of Descartes. According to this view there are two absolutely distinct realms of existence: that of the subject (mind or soul) and that of the object (matter). The latter is the realm 'out there' which operates according to rational objective principles while the other (subjective) realm is private, invisible and inaccessible. The individual person who is a unique union of these two distinct realms is the basic unit of the liberal world-view. As far as politics is concerned the individual mind and its contents are one's own concern; while the external, visible physical body is an objective political concern. According to Locke, we have to accept the dualism of the external (political) realm of power and the internal religious realm of faith in which compulsion had no place. This distinction between the objective public sphere and the subjective private sphere is the foundation 'of all liberal religious toleration and religious liberty'.¹⁴

¹² E. S. Morgan, *Roger Williams: The Church and the State* (New York, 1967), p. 137. For chs. 28-34 of *The Bloody Tenet...* see Mullan, pp. 136-41. Exceptionally for a seventeenth-century Protestant, Williams was prepared to grant toleration even to Roman Catholics: 'It is the will and command of God that (since the coming of His Sonne the Lord Jesus) a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or Antichristian consciences and worships be granted to all men in all nations and countries.'

¹³ R. Clements, 'Can Tolerance Become the Enemy of Christian Freedom? Part I', *Cambridge Papers*, vol. 1, number 1 (1992), p. 2.

¹⁴ Paul Morris, 'Judaism and Pluralism: The Price of Religious Freedom', in ed. Ian Hamnett, *Religious Pluralism and Unbelief* (London, 1990), p. 181. Morris states: 'The public aspect of the individual's life was as a rational citizen of the state.... The individual was free to organize his

Another important brick in the modern foundation of tolerance was laid by John Stuart Mill. His case for tolerance was based on arguments which Ian Markham has demonstrated to have a relativistic tendency, 'in that they question our capacity to achieve total and final truth'. Markham says: 'For many contemporary secularists Mill's mild and implicit relativism becomes more overt and anti-realist: truth is inaccessible; quest for Truth (with a capital T) is doomed to failure; there are only different perspectives on the world; each is as valid as the other.' Markham offers the example of Michael Creuzet's *Toleration and Liberalism* in which 'He argues explicitly that toleration is possible only when one accepts that there are no absolute truth-claims.'¹⁵ On the fatefulness of this move, A. F. Holmes comments: 'Theism had provided a transcendent locus for universally valid truth, in the wisdom of the eternal, self-revealing God. Without an adequate substitute for its divine locus, truth is dislocated and becomes relative to changing natural conditions.'¹⁶

Almost all modern democratic constitutions reflect this liberalist understanding of tolerance, based on the freedom of the individual and the separation of church and state. In this century, and since the Second World War in particular, there have been countless affirmations of the right of freedom of thought, conscience and religion by religious and political bodies alike.¹⁷

private life according to his will, as long as there were no public implications.' Morris believes that: 'The single most significant factor in the history of modern religions is that religion was thus included in the private sphere.... The nineteenth century saw the almost complete "privatization" of religion in Europe and the United States...'. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

¹⁵ Ian S. Markham, *Plurality and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge, 1994), p.16.

¹⁶ A. F. Holmes, 'Relativism', ed. S. B. Ferguson and D. F. Wright, *New Dictionary of Theology* (Leicester, 1988), p. 575.

¹⁷ As, for example, the World Council of Churches' Declaration on Religious Liberty (Amsterdam, 1948), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the UN's Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion and Belief (1981). Easy access to these and some other post-World War II Declarations, including Vatican II's *Dignitatis Humanae Personae*, is provided by Mullan, pp. 317-45.

Before passing on, we should note that one of the most remarkable affirmations of religious liberty this century is that of the Vatican II decree, *Dignitatis Humanae Personae*, passed with something near unanimity on 7 December 1965. It was remarkable because, as recently as 1953, Pius II in his 'Allocution on Tolerance' had reaffirmed the traditional position of the Roman Catholic Church which rejected religious freedom, 'basing himself on the primacy of truth over freedom and repeating the traditional opinion that only truth had rights, but not error.'¹⁸ *Dignitatis*, to the complete contrary, affirms the right of every individual to religious freedom and finds the foundation of that right in the dignity of the person – a dignity disclosed in its full dimensions in the Word of God. As Mullan says, 'The declaration represented a reversal of centuries of official intolerance by the church both in its own right and in its support for state action against Christian dissent. As such it is one of the landmark documents in the history [of the West].'¹⁹

If this hasty survey has revealed anything, it is the sheer tortuousness of the route by which we have arrived at the current situation in respect of tolerance and religious freedom. It is a situation, it has to be acknowledged, which owes far less to the churches and the theologians than 'to the modern state, the jurists and the rational law of nations'.²⁰ And in light of what we have seen it is maybe not surprising that the assumption of increasing numbers of people is that the Christian faith is inherently intolerant of other religions and simply cannot be looked to to provide a solid foundation for religious tolerance as we move into an, inevitably, pluralist future. We need to look more closely at the contemporary challenge to the notion of Christian tolerance.

2. Contemporary Challenges to the Notion of Christian Tolerance.

Christianity and Other Faiths: Three Options

During the last generation or so it has become widespread practice to present the relationship between Christianity and other religions in terms of three major options: those of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism – representing in that order, it is generally believed, increasing levels of

¹⁸ H. R. Schlette, 'Religious Freedom', *Sacramentum Mundi* (London, 1970), vol. 5, p. 295.

¹⁹ Mullan, p. 329.

²⁰ Schlette, *Ibid.*

tolerance. *Exclusivism* is widely held to represent the least hopeful basis for religious tolerance (indeed one finds it not infrequently written off completely in this respect) while *pluralism* to a great majority represents the most, possibly the only, truly tolerant perspective.

What positions do these terms describe?

Exclusivism (an unhappy term because of its immediately misleading and question-begging connotations of arrogance and bigotry) is the position of historic Christianity. While accepting that some claims of other religions may be true and that Christians can learn from adherents of other faiths, this stance is nevertheless rooted in distinctively Christian beliefs. These are helpfully summarized by Harold Netland as four propositions:

(a) Jesus Christ is the unique Incarnation of God, fully God and fully man; (b) only through the person and work of Jesus Christ is there the possibility of salvation; (c) the Bible is God's unique revelation written, and thus is true and authoritative; (d) where the claims of Scripture are incompatible with those of other faiths, the latter are to be rejected as false.²¹

On the intolerance-tolerance spectrum, this position is generally viewed as being at the extreme intolerant end.

Inclusivism, like the exclusivist position, accepts that the central claims of the Christian faith are true. It adopts, however, a much more positive attitude towards other religions. According to D'Costa the twentieth-century roots of inclusivism go back to the Protestant missionary John Farquhar and his book *The Crown of Hinduism*.²² Inclusivists believe that Jesus Christ is the definitive revelation of God and central to God's provision of salvation for humankind but they believe that God also reveals himself and provides salvation through other religions as well.

Famously, the inclusivist position was the one adopted by Vatican II and in the post-conciliar period Karl Rahner has been its major Catholic proponent. Associated with Rahner is the phrase 'anonymous Christian' by which he means 'a non-Christian who gains salvation through faith, hope and love by the grace of Christ, mediated however imperfectly through his or her own religion, which thereby points towards its historical fulfilment in Christ and in his Church.'²³

²¹ H. A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices. Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Leicester, 1991), p. 34.

²² G. D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (Oxford, 1986), p. 7.

²³ D'Costa, p. 88.

A number of evangelical theologians in recent times have come to embrace the inclusivist position while wishing to distance themselves from Rahner's notion of 'anonymous Christians' as going much too far 'in the direction of sanctifying non-Christian religions as vehicles of salvation.' Pinnock, for example, says that he wants to be 'more realistic about the good and evil in religions and not be naive when it comes to building bridges and engaging in dialogue'. But (while rejecting soteriological universalism) he believes that 'everyone will have an opportunity to be saved so that the possibility of salvation is universally accessible'.²⁴ Pinnock wants to leave open the possibility that the unevangelized will have opportunity to respond to Christ after death.²⁵

This position is vulnerable to attack both from the exclusivist camp, since it can be shown to lack biblical support, and from the pluralist side for the Christian paternalism it arguably manifests. And there is no doubt that for many, like John Hick, this position has represented merely a staging-post on the journey from Christian exclusivism to the adoption of full-blown pluralism.

Pluralism, then, represents the third option and the one that has come to dominate the scene, not least because of its associations with tolerance. The term itself is a fairly slippery one and various kinds of pluralism have been distinguished. As helpful as any, for our purposes, is the simple distinction drawn, for example, by Ian Hamnett between religious pluralism as referring to a state of affairs where two or more religious systems co-exist within one society or culture and pluralism as an ideological position.²⁶ The latter is committed to a relativist approach to religious belief as such or, as Netland explains, 'to the position that the many different conceptions of the divine or religious ultimate (Allah, Shiva, Krishna, Yahweh, Nirvana, Sunyatha, etc.) are all various culturally and historically conditioned images of the same divine reality. This entails that [all these terms] ultimately have the same referent, although the

²⁴ Clark Pinnock, 'The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions', in *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World*, ed. Mark A. Noll and David F. Wells (Grand Rapids, 1988), p.167.

²⁵ Clark Pinnock, 'Is Jesus the Only Way?' *Eternity* 27 (December 1976), p. 34.

²⁶ I. Hamnett, 'Religious Pluralism', in (ed.) Hamnett, p. 7.

connotations of the respective terms may differ.²⁷ The claim here, in other words, is that all religions are equally salvific paths to the one God and therefore 'Christianity's claim that it is the only path (exclusivism) or the fulfilment of other paths (inclusivism) should be rejected.'²⁸

Hamnett observes that although the two kinds of pluralism he distinguishes are distinct concepts (logically and analytically), nevertheless in given historical circumstances 'de facto pluralism can modify the internal character of religious belief-systems for the believers themselves.' He points, on the one hand, to the situation in the earlier medieval history of the Middle East when peace between diverse religions was largely maintained on the principle that 'stout fences make good neighbours'. When religious groups are self-contained and close contact between members of each group is strictly limited, 'the internal features of each belief-system tend to remain intact'.²⁹

In striking contrast, we have the contemporary situation in which we are faced with market-place pluralism – one in which we are 'not so much free to choose as compelled to choose'. Hamnett refers to the sociologist Peter Berger's *The Heretical Imperative* (1980) which argues that in such a situation heresy (*haeresis*) becomes imperative. Hamnett comments:

For better or worse this alters the structure of belief in profound ways. When the fences are crumbling, or have quite collapsed, the believer (and the unbeliever too, for that matter) finds himself exiled into an unorganized and anomic world of choice where, whether he likes it or not, he is 'forced to be free'. Belief loses something, or much, or all, of that quality of givenness which well-patrolled boundaries formerly secured for those held safe within the camp.³⁰

It is not difficult to see the relevance of these observations to the current situation in the West.

In recent times pluralism has found increasing numbers of adherents in both the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches. The best known representative is, of course, John Hick, a Yorkshireman whose early evangelical exclusivism was followed by the adoption of the full pluralist

²⁷ Netland, 'Exclusivism, Tolerance and Truth,' *Missiology* 15 (1987), pp. 84-5. Quoted in R. H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Saviour?* (Grand Rapids, 1994), p. 55.

²⁸ D'Costa, p. 22.

²⁹ Hamnett, pp. 6-7.

³⁰ Hamnett, p. 7.

position, as marked by the publication of his *God and the Universe of Faiths*.³¹

The Appeal of Ideological Pluralism

Why is ideological pluralism so attractive to so many people at the present time? John Stott suggests six reasons: three general and three particular. The latter three are those offered by Hick and the other authors of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*³² for their crossing of what they refer to as their 'theological Rubicon'.

First, '*the new global consciousness*'. Various influences are causing increasing numbers of people to develop a global perspective. 'The very survival of the human race seems to depend on our learning to live together in harmony and to co-operate for the common good. Whatever divides us, therefore, including our religions, is understandably regarded with increasing disfavour.'³³

Second, '*the new appreciation of other religions*'. Modern methods of communication, for example, have produced a situation where 'people of strange beliefs and customs, who hitherto have been very remote from us, now live next door to us, and actually enter our homes – on the screen if not in person.... And as we become better acquainted with the world's religions, what Professor John Hick has called their "immense spiritual riches" have 'tended to erode the plausibility of the old Christian exclusivism''.³⁴

Third, '*the new post-colonial modesty*'. Stott refers to the shift in theological consciousness which has paralleled the profound post-Second World War cultural shift in the West from one of superiority to equality in respect of the non-Western world. In light of the cultural shift, 'to continue...to claim Christian universality, it is said, is to lapse into the old imperialist mindset'.³⁵

In addition, the three particular bridges which Hick and his colleagues say took them across their theological Rubicon were:

³¹ J. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London, 1973).

³² Ed. J. Hick and P. F. Knitter, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (London, 1987). See also, by way of response, G. D'Costa, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religion* (Leominster, 1991).

³³ John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Leicester, 1992), p. 298.

³⁴ Stott, p. 299.

³⁵ Stott, p. 300.

a. the *historico-cultural* bridge, or *relativity*. They came to hold that since all religions are the creations of the human imagination, each from a particular cultural perspective, the Christian faith must cease from its claim to be in possession of absolute or final truth.

b. the *theologico-mystical* bridge, or *mystery*. This step involves a recognition that all religions equally represent 'some sense of the Transcendent or experience of God who, being himself infinite and ineffable always remains beyond our apprehensions of him'.³⁶ Another contributor to *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, maintains that therefore 'for Christians to think that Christianity is true, or final, or salvific, is a form of idolatry'. Another contributor, Tom Driver, defines idolatry as 'the insistence that there is only one way, one norm, one truth'.³⁷

c. The *ethico-practical* bridge, or *justice*. Stott describes the contributors to Part III of *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* as 'outraged by the sufferings of the oppressed and united in their commitment to social justice'. Pluralism, for them, 'is not an end in itself, but a means to the end of liberating the oppressed'. Such a goal requires 'a worldwide liberation movement' which, in turn, 'needs a worldwide inter-religious dialogue'.³⁸ In this light the only important criterion for judging any particular religion appears to be the quality of its contribution to the promotion of social justice.

For these reasons pluralism is the preferred option and represents the only truly tolerant religious attitude in our modern world. Christian exclusivism, by contrast, is widely portrayed as intolerant and morally deficient. According to Cantwell Smith, 'Exclusivism strikes more and more Christians as immoral. If the head proves it true, while the heart sees it as wicked, un-Christian, then should Christians not follow the heart? Maybe this is the crux of our dilemma.'³⁹ 'Similarly,' writes Netland, 'the historian Arnold Toynbee, a vigorous critic of exclusivism, asserted that the only way to purge Christianity of the 'sinful state of mind' of

³⁶ Stott, p. 302.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Stott, p. 303.

³⁹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, 'An Attempt at Summation', in *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, ed. G. H. Anderson and T. F. Stransky (New York, 1981), p. 202. Quoted in Netland, p. 302.

exclusive-mindedness and its accompanying spirit of intolerance is to shed the traditional belief that Christianity is unique'.⁴⁰

Some Responses to the Charge of Exclusivist Intolerance

Three responses may be made at this point to the charge of intolerance often levelled at the exclusivist position. First, Christian exclusivists can learn a good deal from the pluralists and should be able to identify, in a way they have not always done, with many pluralist concerns. As John Stott, for one, acknowledges, evangelical Christians are bound to identify with the commitment of many pluralists to the search for global harmony, the pursuit of social justice and the service of the poor. We must recognize that past colonial attitudes of superiority were arrogant, that further knowledge of other religions does bring us enrichment, that the mystery of God is beyond human apprehension and even that the Bible is a culturally-conditioned book. But none of these alignments can ever be at the expense of commitment to the truth.⁴¹

Second, we should humbly confess that Christian exclusivists have been as capable of showing arrogance, insensitivity and bigotry as others and that indefensible things have been done by professing Christianity. It is, of course, another question altogether whether these evils are a necessary entailment of the exclusivist position.

Third, the charge of intolerance needs to be turned back on the pluralist position.⁴² Don Carson makes the important point that in many Western societies the nature of tolerance has changed. Tolerance used to be a matter of relating to people but now it mainly concerns ideas. When tolerance is primarily directed towards people, its practice enables the most vigorous of debates over the relative merit of this or that idea to take place while the highest standards of mutual courtesy are maintained. The new practice of tolerance, however, brings with it no inherent demand to be tolerant of people and, says Carson, 'it is especially difficult to be tolerant of those

⁴⁰ Netland, p. 303. See Arnold Toynbee, *Christianity Among the Religions of the World* (New York 1957), pp. 95ff.

⁴¹ Stott, p. 304.

⁴² The '90s have seen a growing body of academic writing calling attention to the intolerance inherent in the pluralist position. See *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (New York, 1990). Cf. Peter Donovan, 'The Intolerance of Religious Pluralism', *Religious Studies* 29 (1993), pp. 217-29.

people whose views are so far outside the accepted “plausibility structures” that they think your brand of tolerance is muddleheaded.’ He points out, too, how this brand of tolerance results in less discussion of the merits of competing ideas

because tolerance of diverse ideas demands that we avoid criticizing the opinions of others; in addition, there is almost no discussion where the ideas at issue are of the religious sort that claim to be valid for everyone everywhere: that sort of notion is right outside the modern ‘plausibility structure’ (to use Peter Berger’s term) and has to be trashed.⁴³

In the religious context, relativistic tolerance immediately rules out ‘any strong opinion that makes exclusive truth claims – all, that is, except the dogmatic opinion that all dogmatic opinions are to be ruled out, the dogmatic opinion that we must dismiss any assertion that some opinions are false’.⁴⁴ In an address given a few years ago in Edinburgh, under the auspices of Rutherford House, the late Bishop Lesslie Newbigin told how he found himself in a group of people and used the word ‘dogma’, only to apologize immediately for using it since it made some in the group so angry. He was interrupted by the head of a large comprehensive school who said, ‘Don’t apologize. I know perfectly well that in my school dogma reigns in every department except R.E. where it is treated as rubbish.’ Newbigin remarked, ‘Of course she was perfectly right. The difference is not between those who rely on dogma and those who don’t. It’s the difference between those who know what the dogma is they are relying on and those who do not.’⁴⁵

There is no doubt that pluralism is a dogmatic position. It makes much of the notion of universal human experience of spirituality but insists, apparently as an absolute truth, ‘that God has not or cannot reveal himself in an absolute or propositional way’.⁴⁶ Clements also calls attention to the real threat posed to liberty of conscience by the religious variety of political correctness which it engenders. ‘School teachers who wish to express a personal commitment to the uniqueness of Christ may find

⁴³ D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Leicester, 1996), p. 32.

⁴⁴ Carson, p. 33.

⁴⁵ The tape of this address entitled, ‘The Trinity as Public Truth’, is available from Rutherford House, 17 Claremont Park, Edinburgh, EH6 7PJ.

⁴⁶ Clements, ‘Can Tolerance Become the Enemy of Christian Freedom? Part II’, *Cambridge Papers*, Vol. 1; number 3, Sept. 1992, p. 2.

themselves viewed as blinkered fanatics out to brainwash their pupils. An evangelical scholar who is known to defend a Nicene view of the deity of Christ may find it hard to achieve academic promotion. Would-be ordinands who confess an ambition to convert Jews or Muslims to Christ may discover that their sense of divine vocation is not endorsed by ministerial accreditation panels.⁴⁷ None as illiberal as the liberals, they say, and examples of pluralistic intolerance could easily be documented.

3. Tolerance and Scripture: the Truth Issue

What this paper wishes to affirm is that, contrary to widespread belief, the position of Christian exclusivism offers the only stable basis for tolerance as we move into a new millenium. Our starting point is one which the pluralists of necessity deny: God's revelation of himself in his Word, personal (Jesus Christ) and written (the Old and New Testament Scriptures). As such it is the only sure and certain guide for human beings and its revealed standards of truth and morality the only reliable reference points for our lives. This is where we must begin.

What is Truth?

Clearly the issue of truth is at the heart of the current debate and the kind of tolerance which we will cherish depends largely on how we relate to it.⁴⁸ As we have seen, the dominant view is that since all religions are equal in status and independently valid, when they appear to be making independent truth claims we must 'live with the paradox of mutual contradiction and logical inconsistency'. Religion after all is 'a universal human experience of spirituality which transcends rational analysis and verbal articulation'.⁴⁹

This, put beside the assumption of a radical divide between the public realm of 'facts' (above all in the physical sciences) and the private realm of 'values', means that 'since religion is said to be limited to this private world of values and preferences, questions of truth and falsity are

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Stott puts his finger on the nub of the matter in saying that his response to the six reasons why some find pluralism attractive is basically the same: 'They beg the question of truth; we want to press the question of truth. Has God fully and finally revealed himself in Christ, and in the total biblical testimony to Christ, or not?' Stott, *op. cit.*, p. 304.

⁴⁹ Clements, Part II, p. 2.

inappropriate in religious matters'.⁵⁰ Or, as Newbigin puts it, 'The rival truth claims of the different religions are not felt to call for argument or resolution; they are simply part of the mosaic – or perhaps one should say kaleidoscope – of different values that make up the whole pattern.'⁵¹

Truth, on this view, is whatever works for the individual. There is no ultimate distinction between truth and error. And the argument is that only on the basis of this understanding of truth is tolerance possible. The result, as Clements says, is 'that tolerance which began in the seventeenth century as an expression of Christian confidence in the self-authenticating power of absolute Truth, has in the late twentieth century become an expression rather of a profound uncertainty regarding absolute Truth'.⁵² The impact of this situation on the contemporary church is plain. Carson remarks that while past ages disagreed over what exactly constituted heresy, 'for the first time in history large numbers deny that theological corruption is possible'.⁵³ If the church seems to have little or nothing to say to the contemporary world, this is, suggests Stott, because

the church itself is confused; it shares in the current bewilderment, instead of addressing it. The church is insecure; it is uncertain of its identity, mission and message. It stammers and stutters when it should be proclaiming the gospel with boldness. Indeed, the major reason for its diminishing influence in the West is its diminishing faith.⁵⁴

Our calling is to be witnesses to the truth, but if the very notion of truth is in question, it is little wonder that the trumpet gives an uncertain sound.

Propositional Truth and the Principle of Noncontradiction

Netland provides a helpful discussion of this vital subject of religion and truth. He examines various attempts to formulate theories of religious truth that do not include the notions of propositional and exclusive truth and finds serious problems with each of them. He argues that any acceptable theory of religious truth must 'recognize that beliefs are integral to religion and that truth in religion, just as in other domains, must include the notion of propositional and exclusive truth'.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Netland, p. 36.

⁵¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (London, 1986), p. 16.

⁵² Clements, Part I, p. 2.

⁵³ Carson, p. 354.

⁵⁴ Stott, p. 183.

⁵⁵ Netland, p. 150.

Netland clarifies what he means by propositional truth. To say that truth is propositional 'is to recognize that although "true" and "truth" can be used in a variety of ways, in the logically basic sense truth is a quality or property of propositions. That is, truth is a property of propositions such that a proposition is true if and only if the state of affairs to which it refers is as the proposition asserts it to be; otherwise it is false.'⁵⁶

While it is clear that divine revelation cannot be identified with a set of propositions nevertheless,

insofar as revelation is informative about God – and surely this is the whole point about revelation in the first place – it must be capable of being expressed propositionally. It is simply nonsensical to think in terms of knowledge of God that is nonpropositional. If the propositional element is eliminated from divine revelation, whatever else one is left with, it cannot be informative about God.⁵⁷

Netland suggests that it is naive and misleading to present the alternatives (as is often done) as an exclusive disjunction – we either have propositional truth about God or existential encounter with God, but not both. 'Not only is it possible to have both,' responds Netland,

one cannot respond appropriately to God without first having some knowledge of God. The believer can only respond personally to God as Lord and Saviour if he or she already knows something about what God is like and what he expects from humankind. And the more one knows about God the more one will be able to know God personally and respond appropriately to him. As Nash puts it, 'Personal encounter cannot take place in a cognitive vacuum.'⁵⁸

The assumption, which he finds implicit in much contemporary theology, that 'propositional revelation is abstract, detached, cold and incapable of eliciting more than a bland intellectual response of mental assent from believers', Netland quite rejects.

There is no reason why we must suppose that propositions about God cannot prompt powerful and moving personal responses from individuals. Propositions may indeed be 'response evoking', as Paul Helm puts it, particularly if the propositions have to do with the nature of God (*e.g.* his love) and what he has graciously done for humankind.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Netland, pp. 114-15.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.126.

⁵⁸ Netland, pp. 126-7.

⁵⁹ Netland, p.127. Cf. Helm, *The Divine Revelation* (London, 1982), p. 27. Helm shows how, for the Westminster Divines, 'the words and

Moreover, Christian exclusivism is based on the principle of non-contradiction: two contradictory statements cannot both be true. Netland describes the growing trend, even in the western Christian church to resolve questions of how Christians should relate to one another by appealing to an indeterminate higher form of 'Truth' not limited by this principle of non-contradiction. He rejects this stance as epistemologically untenable.

The price of rejecting the principle of noncontradiction is forfeiture of the possibility of meaningful affirmation about anything at all – including any statement about the religious ultimate. One who abandons the principle of noncontradiction is reduced to utter silence, for he or she has rejected a necessary condition for the meaningful statement of any position whatsoever.⁶⁰

Truth and (In)tolerance in Scripture

It seems clear that the understanding of truth espoused by Christian exclusivism reflects that of the Bible itself. In a significant article, Roger Nicole has analyzed how the word 'truth' is used in both the Old and New Testaments.⁶¹ He finds that in the Old Testament '*emet*' means not only faithfulness (the quality that provides appropriate ground for confidence) but, in many instances, truth in the sense of 'that which is conformed to reality in contrast to anything that would be erroneous or deceitful'.⁶² There are also many instances of '*emet*' coming to mean, by extension, truth as 'the embodiment of God's wise and merciful pattern for human life'. The Psalmist, for example, prayed, 'Guide me in your truth' (Ps. 25:5).⁶³ Both faithfulness and commitment to truth among human beings is intended to reflect the fact that God himself is supremely the God of truth (e.g. 2 Chron. 15:3; Ps. 31:5; Jer. 10:10) – the God 'who sums up in himself the fulness of faithfulness and truth'.⁶⁴

propositions of the gospel are not a barrier to faith in Christ, they are a necessary condition of that faith' (*loc. cit.*).

⁶⁰ Netland, p. 145.

⁶¹ Roger Nicole, 'The Biblical Concept of Truth', in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (1983) pp. 287-98.

⁶² P. 290. He cites Deut. 13:14; 17:4; 22:20; Prov. 8:7; Isa. 43:9; Jer. 9:5; Dan. 11:2, etc.

⁶³ *Ibid.* Other examples given are: Pss. 26:3; 43:3; 51:6; 119:43; Prov. 23:23; Dan. 8:12, etc.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

In the New Testament, *aletheia* and its cognates are used frequently (some 183 times). Here the connotation of faithfulness is not so much to the fore (the latter idea is represented in the New Testament more by words of the *pistos* family) and the 'primary...emphasis is...on truth as conformity to reality and in opposition to lies and error'⁶⁵ (e.g. John 7: 18; Eph. 4:25; 1 John 2:21). There are also many expressions linking truth with witness, thus establishing that 'truth is viewed as factuality.... In John 5:33 and 18:37 our Lord represents himself as a witness to the truth. To give this witness is one of the purposes of His incarnation.'⁶⁶ As in the Old Testament, truth represents not only conformity to fact but (notably in 1 John) 'that pattern of living that conforms to the revealed will of God'.⁶⁷ A further important connotation of truth, found especially in the writings of John (e.g. John 1:9; 6:32; 6:55; 15:1; cf. Heb. 8:2; 9:24), involves 'the contrast not so much between correct and false, but rather between complete and incomplete, definitive and provisional, full-orbed and partial'. This means that John 1:17, for example, while it 'does not deny the gracious character of the truth content of the Torah,' nevertheless 'emphasizes that the administration of grace in its complete and ultimate form is the fruit of the incarnation of the Logos, 'who came from the Father, full of grace and truth' (John 1:14).⁶⁸

As Nicole concludes, the elements of factuality, faithfulness and completeness must each be given their proper place in any accurate account of the biblical concept of truth. Ultimately, truth is a perfection of the triune God himself – not only as the only genuine God but as the truthful one. His word is the truth, his law is the embodiment of truth and his faithfulness to his word grounds 'full confidence on the part of believers'.⁶⁹

In the light of this understanding of truth as a perfection of the Deity, as the hallmark of his revelation in Scripture and in Christ and as the path we are called to walk, it is not surprising to find a correspondingly intolerant strain running through the Scriptures. A Jewish rabbi in the States used to enjoy saying in public, 'Tolerance is not a theological virtue,' to the dismay of the good liberals in his audience. Religion, he would then say, is about truth, not tolerance. In the light of Scripture he appears to be both right and wrong.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

The contemporary relativistic view of truth cannot be squared with the radical intolerance of idolatry and its ethical consequences, both outside and within God's covenant community, which we find in the Old Testament. The first of the Ten Commandments is a prohibition against idolatry (Exod. 20:3). Joshua insisted that the choice facing the people was stark: other gods or Yahweh (Josh. 24:14-15). Any Israelite found secretly enticing another to engage in the worship of other gods was to be executed without compassion (Deut. 13: 6-11).

For many people the most objectionable expression of intolerance in the Old Testament was the kind of ethnic cleansing involved in the conquest of Canaan. Recent memories of Rwanda and the tragic events unfolding in the Balkans (not to speak of the more remote activities of the Crusaders and Conquistadors) make this a sensitive and difficult question. Vanhoozer calls attention to the way in which the Bible has been used to justify the oppression of persons or peoples but argues convincingly that this is the fault, not of biblical ideology, but of the way in which the Bible has been interpreted. 'For the text itself contains sufficient resources with which to provide adequate checks and balances on attempts to appropriate it for alien political purposes.'⁷⁰

The New Testament and Christian Tolerance

In the light of the clearer revelation of God's will in the New Testament, the violent aspects of Old Testament exclusivist intolerance fall away. The primary citizenship of Christians is in the coming kingdom of God from which all violence will be excluded. Christians are called to be peace-

⁷⁰ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* (Leicester, 1998), p. 179. With regard to the application of the Conquest narrative to new situations, Vanhoozer comments, 'My strategy, were I to construct an adequate response, would be to appeal to the fuller canonical context of the biblical text itself. In the immediate literary context, it is clear that the taking of Canaan was to be a once-for-all event. It had to do with the fulfilling of a specific divine promise to Abraham and cannot, therefore, be made into a general principle. Moreover, the land was not simply a possession, but "the vehicle of a benefit, the promised rest" (Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* [London: SCM, 1992], 146). Finally, in the context of the canon as a whole, it is Jesus, not Joshua, who leads his people into a new, eschatological rest (Heb. 4:1-11).' *Ibid.*, p. 193, n. 172.

makers, to be prepared to suffer patiently even when its cause is unjust and to overcome evil with good. We have no biblical justification to attempt to purge idolatry or heresy with the weapons beloved of the Inquisition. That said, it must equally be affirmed that the New Testament manifests no more theological tolerance of idolatry than does the Old. Likewise, the truth claims of the gospel are affirmed as exclusive and absolute. The claim of our Lord is entirely unqualified: 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me' (John 14:6) and the idea that Christians would welcome any other gospel led Paul to employ some of the most searing language found anywhere in Scripture (Gal. 1:6-9). Exclusivism is unquestionably the stance of biblical Christianity.

But as *Dignitatis* brings out well in its section on 'Religious Freedom in the Light of Revelation,' it is the same biblical revelation that makes known the inherent dignity of human beings and in doing so uncovers the foundation for religious freedom and tolerance: 'Revelation...disclose(s) the dignity of the human person in its full dimensions. It gives evidence of the respect which Christ showed toward the freedom with which man is to fulfil his duty of belief in the Word of God. It gives us lessons too in the spirit which disciples of such a Master ought to make their own and to follow in every situation.'⁷¹

The truth of God 'appears at its height in Christ Jesus, in whom God perfectly manifested Himself and His ways with men'. He displayed the utmost meekness, humility and patience towards others. While he denounced the unbelief of some, he left vengeance to God. In sending out the apostles he told them: 'He who believes and is baptized shall be saved, but he who does not believe shall be condemned' (Mark 16:16), 'but He Himself, noting that cockle had been sown mid the wheat, gave orders that both should be allowed to grow until the harvest time, which will come at the end of the world'. He acknowledged the authority of governments but 'gave clear warning that the higher rights of God are to be kept inviolate (Matt. 22:21).' He refused to be a political Messiah and showed himself the perfect servant of God. And then:

In the end, when He completed on the cross the work of redemption whereby He achieved salvation and true freedom for men, He also brought His revelation to completion. He bore witness to the truth, but He refused to impose the truth by force on those who spoke against it. Not by force of blows does His rule assert its claims. Rather, it is established by witnessing to the truth and by hearing the truth, and it

⁷¹ *Dignitatis Humanae Personae*, II.9. See Mullan, p. 336.

extends its dominion by the love whereby Christ, lifted up on the cross, draws all men to himself.

The apostles in turn 'followed the example of the gentleness and respectfulness of Christ'. Renouncing coercion and methods unworthy of the gospel, they strove to have people converted to faith in Christ as Lord by the power of the Word of God alone. 'They were unceasingly bent on bearing witness to the truth of God' but 'showed respect for weaker souls even though these persons were in error'. Like the Master, they recognized legitimate civil authority but 'did not hesitate to speak out against governing powers which set themselves in opposition to the holy will of God...'.⁷²

The disciple of Christ today is therefore under obligation to understand, proclaim and defend the gospel but 'never – be it understood – having recourse to means that are incompatible with the spirit of the gospel. At the same time, the charity of Christ urges him to act lovingly, prudently and patiently in his dealings with those who are in error or in ignorance with regard to the faith'.⁷³

If, for Roman Catholics, the above paragraphs represent an extraordinary *volte-face*, it should be noted that it is one that is true to the biblical witness. In the light of that witness, what kind of tolerance should Christians seek to exemplify and promote in the pluralistic world of the twenty-first century?

4. Practical Application: Contexts of Christian Tolerance

It may be helpful to distinguish four different contexts in which the notion of tolerance is applicable: the legal, social, intellectual and ecclesiastical.⁷⁴

In the legal context, Christians and the church should have no hesitation in affirming basic rights for all, regardless of religious affiliation. Scripture requires no less of us. Christians should fully support legal tolerance of religious pluralism which is 'essentially a formal recognition of the basic human right of each individual to choose which religious tradition to become a part of (if any at all) and to participate freely in the practices of that tradition'.⁷⁵ Today we tend to take for granted this right as guaranteed by the constitutions of western democracies. We too easily forget that in many countries it simply does not exist. In an

⁷² *Dignitatis*, II.11. Mullan, pp. 336-8.

⁷³ *Dignitatis*, II.14. Mullan, pp. 339-40.

⁷⁴ Netland helpfully discusses the first three: *Ibid.*, pp. 305f.

⁷⁵ Netland, p. 305.

officially Islamic state like Saudi Arabia, for example, it is illegal and punishable to attempt to convert Muslims to another faith.

For herself the church rightly claims freedom, as *Dignitatis* expresses it, 'In human society and in the face of government...in her character as a spiritual authority, established by Christ the Lord. Upon this authority there rests, by divine mandate, the duty of going out into the whole world and preaching the gospel to every creature.' According to *Dignitatis*, the church also claims the right 'in her character as a society of men...to live in society in accordance with the precepts of Christian faith,' while 'the Christian faithful, in common with all other men, possess the civil right not to be hindered in leading their lives in accordance with their conscience'.⁷⁶

Christians should also lead in affirming tolerance in the social context. The Christian knows that, as made in the divine image, each human being is of incalculable worth. It, therefore, matters greatly how we treat one another. We are to love those with whom we may disagree profoundly. Acknowledging the difficulty in achieving the ideal, not least in highly pluralistic societies, Netland holds that 'evangelicals must take the lead in cultivating social tolerance for those with differing religious views'.⁷⁷ We should show love to all, be unfailingly courteous and helpful and live at peace with all men. We, of all, should be attractive people.⁷⁸

The third context in which tolerance applies relates to the area of fundamental beliefs. Here we must hold that tolerance is fully compatible with non-acceptance of all the beliefs of others as true. We must also insist that true tolerance is fully compatible with the carrying out of the church's mission in evangelism and the free proclamation of the good news of salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. We must insist (courteously) that to denounce evangelism as spiritual imperialism is wrong-headed. As Netland puts it,

The evangelical conviction that all persons are in need of God's gracious forgiveness, that this is available only through Jesus Christ, and that out of obedience and love Christians are to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ to all who have never heard, in and of itself is not

⁷⁶ *Dignitatis*, II.13-14. Mullan, pp. 338-9.

⁷⁷ Netland, p. 306.

⁷⁸ A fine discussion of the attitude Christians should have to people of other faiths is found in G. Grogan, *The Christ of the Bible and the Church's Faith* (Fearn, 1998), pp. 270-75. On the complex issue of dialogue, Netland's discussion is excellent: pp. 283-301.

intolerant. It is the methods used to communicate this conviction that can be said to be tolerant or intolerant.⁷⁹

If the human predicament is as desperate as we believe it to be and the gospel as true and wonderful as we believe it to be, it would be intolerable not to evangelize. In a sermon delivered at the fiftieth anniversary of the Tambaram Missionary Conference in 1988, Bishop Lesslie Newbigin spoke these moving words:

If, in fact, it is true that almighty God, creator and sustainer of all that exists in heaven and on earth, has – at a known time and place in human history – so humbled himself as to become part of our sinful humanity, and to suffer and die a shameful death to take away our sin, and to rise from the dead as the first-fruit of a new creation, if this is a fact, then to affirm it is not arrogance. To remain quiet about it is treason to our fellow human beings. If it is really true, as it is, that ‘the Son of God loved me and gave himself up for me’, how can I agree that this amazing act of matchless grace should merely become part of a syllabus for the ‘comparative study of religions’?⁸⁰

In Christian evangelism the question of methods is crucially important. Dreadful damage has been done to the Christian cause by the use of methods that are unworthy of the gospel. In under a month from Christmas Day last year there were one hundred and fifty attacks on Christian targets in India – more than in the first fifty years since independence put together. On 23 January, Graham Staines, an Australian missionary who had worked in a leper colony in Orissa for more than thirty years, was incinerated in his car, together with his sons Philip (9) and Timothy (6). The reasons for this violent backlash are doubtless complex. But sadly, at least part of the explanation appears to have been the questionable nature of the methods being used by some missionaries in recent times. Natasha Mann reported:

There are some very evangelical groups, small groups, who will persuade people by hook or by crook in the name of miracles, says one Christian worker in the region.

⁷⁹ Netland, pp. 312-13.

⁸⁰ Quoted in Stott, p. 305. On the question of the resurgence of other religions and the comparative failure of Christianity, Stott comments that ‘these things should lead us not to the conclusion that the gospel is untrue, but rather to self-examination, repentance, amendment of life, and the adoption of better ways of sharing the good news with others.’ Stott, *Ibid.*, p. 300.

Some are in it for profit. There is a rumour that one group is receiving a dollar per person. It is a relatively recent phenomenon. Over the last ten years there have been some Pentecostal, evangelical groups who use trick and miracle cures. They give antibiotic powder and link it with the name of Jesus and easily convince people.⁸¹

There is in fact no greater expression of love to our neighbour than to communicate the gospel to them, providing that we do so in the spirit of the great evangelist of the early church who said, 'We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God' (2 Cor. 4:2).

A fourth context in which the issue of tolerance is important is that of the Christian church itself. Here again our record leaves much to be desired. Cardinal Newman's words are telling: 'Oh, how we hate one another for the love of God!'⁸² As Augustine saw clearly, although his practice in relation to the Donatists left much to be desired, the issue of tolerance in the intra-church context arises because of the need to distinguish between the ideal (perfect) church of the age to come where there will be no need for tolerance, because all will be united in perfect knowledge, holiness and love, and the imperfect church of this present time, called and committed indeed to truth, love and holiness but whose life and witness are too often marred by error, discord and sin.

'Not,' as John Stott says, 'that we are to acquiesce in its failures. We are to cherish the vision of both the purity and the unity of the church, namely its doctrinal and ethical purity and its visible unity.... And in pursuit of these things there is a place for discipline in cases of serious heresy or sin.'⁸³ Stott adds, 'Neither Scripture nor church history justifies the use of severe disciplinary measures in an attempt to secure a perfectly pure church in this world.'⁸⁴ He is surely right.

The actual practice of discipline in the contemporary church varies widely. Within Scottish Presbyterianism, according to Henry Sefton, it has

⁸¹ 'Burning down the mission', *Scotsman*, 16 April 1999.

⁸² See Netland, p. 304.

⁸³ Stott, *Ibid.*, pp. 388-9.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 389.

largely lapsed in the Church of Scotland.⁸⁵ In the smaller Presbyterian Churches, matters of church discipline sometimes appear to dominate all else. Indeed they have become so divisive that, in the view of some, small church Presbyterianism in Scotland is on the brink of the abyss.

The New Testament gives clear warning against both permissiveness (as seen, for example, in the toleration of the practice of incest in the church in Corinth) and the heavy-handed authoritarianism that would use discipline as an instrument of power to destroy true liberty of conscience. Small denominations have always run the risk of producing leaders who thrive on the sense of self-importance which being big fish in a small pond tends to encourage. Church discipline, whose regular (and ruthless) exercise helps consolidate both authority and a reputation for 'faithfulness' in some quarters, lies temptingly close to hand. And there is some evidence that the 'left' in power can be every bit as heavy-handed as the 'right'.

The great difficulty of getting things right in the area of discipline is suggested by comparing the message to the church in Ephesus with that to the church in Pergamum or Thyatira (in Revelation chapter 2). The church in Ephesus was praised because it would not tolerate evil-doers, but rebuked for abandoning the love it had at first. Intolerance had apparently bred an inquisitorial spirit that left little room for love. On the other hand, the church in Thyatira is praised for the love it manifests but rebuked for tolerating the activities of the seducing prophetess Jezebel. The pressures of a non-Christian pluralist society had blurred the distinction between the church and the world. As G. B. Caird commented, 'how narrow is the safe path between the sin of tolerance and the sin of intolerance!'⁸⁶

Some sections of the church, therefore, need to be recalled to a recognition of the seriousness (even cruelty) of heresy.⁸⁷ New Testament warnings about the damage done by false teachings (e.g. 1 Tim. 1:3-5; 6:3-5) and concern for the guarding of the pure content of the gospel (cf. 1 Tim. 6:20) require to be heard with a new clarity. Other, discipline-happy, sections of the church need to be warned against trying to be more faithful than Scripture itself. Sometimes the fault arises through failure to

⁸⁵ H. R. Sefton, 'Discipline', ed. N. M. de S. Cameron, D. F. Wright, *etc.*, *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Edinburgh, 1993), p. 246.

⁸⁶ G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St John the Divine* (2nd edn, London, 1984), p. 41.

⁸⁷ See C. F. Allison, *The Cruelty of Heresy: An Affirmation of Christian Orthodoxy* (London, 1994).

distinguish between what can properly be required for church membership and what is appropriate in the case of office-bearers who are expected to subscribe to confessional statements.⁸⁸ Sometimes, it is failure to appreciate that not every teaching of Scripture is intended to serve as a test of orthodoxy. As Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 make clear, the Scriptures themselves urge mutual tolerance in some areas of disagreement. Sometimes authoritarian discipline is simply an expression of fallen human desire to lord it over the consciences of others.⁸⁹

'Let both grow together until the harvest,' said Jesus in the parable that was so important to Augustine. While the whole question of what exactly is tolerable in the Christian church still awaits proper analysis, the burning concern for the unity of the church manifested both by Christ and his apostles, strongly argues that we will only ever approximate to the correct view when the promotion of (biblical) ecumenism is of prime concern to us also. Clearly, we have a long way to go.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ John Frame suggests that 'if the church requires its officers to subscribe to every "jot and tittle" of the confession on pain of ecclesiastical discipline, the confession becomes in principle unamendable.' Such a creed, he argues, 'becomes, in effect, the equivalent of Scripture; Scripture itself loses its unique authority in the church'. He adds, 'There must be some leeway, some at least momentary tolerance, some leg room for people who conscientiously believe that something in the confession is unscriptural'. Frame, *Evangelical Reunion* (Grand Rapids, 1991), p. 97. For office-bearers of our smaller Presbyterian Churches there is, in fact, no leg room.

⁸⁹ Commenting on 1 Cor. 8:9, Calvin, after emphasizing the Lord's desire that we have concern for the weak (those not yet well grounded in godliness), goes on: 'At the same time he [Paul] hints that tough giants, who want to play the tyrant, and put our freedom under their control, can be safely ignored; because one need not be afraid of offending people who are not led into sin by weakness, but who, at the same time, are eagerly on the look-out for something to find fault with.' *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, Calvin's Commentaries*, ed. D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh, 1960), p. 178.

⁹⁰ The approach to ecumenism represented by the WCC appears to be in some trouble. Strong criticisms of the WCC and serious questions about its future were voiced at the meeting of its Eighth Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe, in December, 1998. According to one report,

Concluding Reflections: Tolerance, Truth and the Public Square

Richard Neuhaus famously spoke of the contemporary public square as 'naked', stripped of its old values. All around us, as David Wells puts it, 'are the outlook and values that arise in a society that is no longer taking its bearings from a transcendent order'.⁹¹ The moral vacuum thus created is all too apparent in many areas of contemporary life, not least in education which pleads that it is obliged to be value-neutral, with the (tragic) result that 'in the new civilization which is emerging, children are lifted away from the older values like anchorless boats on a rising tide.'⁹²

But if God's word represents absolute and public truth then we have a responsibility to hold it forth with boldness and courtesy in the public square from which in the past we have been too ready to retreat into our gospel ghettos. We need more psychological intolerance of all that stands against the truth as it is in Jesus whether in the political, social, economic or educational spheres. If the Hindus, for example, are able, by their protests, to prevent the showing of an episode of *Xena: Warrior Princess* because of its offensiveness to the Hindu community, what offensively anti-Christian material might be kept off our screens if Christians could act appropriately and in concert? One has to be aware, of course, of the deep-seated antagonism to orthodox Christianity which the media regularly display. But they have to listen when sufficient numbers speak out.

The already considerable pressures on a shrinking church to bring its view of truth into line with the prevailing consensus will intensify in the new century. This temptation will probably be felt most acutely in our national Church, as it finds itself increasingly marginalized in a secular society. David Wright notes how the Kirk at times seems to attract 'the harshest intolerance – as though it is being made to pay for its privileged

'Orthodox and Anglican representatives complained that their communions were under-represented in the Council. The former had threatened withdrawal before because of the way in which Christian truth and ethics were being de-emphasized by the WCC. The Anglicans expressed concern about the way in which the decline in Western Christianity and the world-wide dimension of mission was being ignored.' *The Banner of Truth* (April 1999), p. 8.

⁹¹ D. F. Wells, *No Place for Truth Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids, 1993), p. 80.

⁹² Wells, p. 84.

history.⁹³ He perceives the danger to lie 'not in the denigration itself' but in the reaction of a 'quiet, perhaps half-unconscious, resolve never again to expose oneself or the Church on this or that unpopular tenet of faith, to soft-pedal the gospel which originally met with incredulity from Graeco-Roman gentiles and sounded deeply offensive to many Jews, to tailor the Church's teaching or service to what sceptics or humanists will bear in silence.'⁹⁴ He is surely right to state that, however painful an experience marginalization may be for a body like the Kirk, when that marginalization is caused by 'ever-widening forces of unbelief and immorality' the words of the Master must be heeded: 'What will it profit a person (or a Church) to gain the whole world and lose its soul?'.⁹⁵

Our calling as individual Christians and as the church of Jesus Christ is to serve as witnesses to the truth. Whatever else we allow to go, we *must* not, we *dare* not, give up our stewardship of the truth of the gospel. Some of us believe that God has a great purpose in store for our national Church in terms of its role in furthering the interests of Christ's kingdom in this land. It is a purpose that will be realized only as we are given grace to resist the temptation to sell our birthright for a mess of short-lived 'popular acceptance'.

⁹³ David F. Wright, 'The Kirk: National or Christian?' in *The Realm of Reform*, ed. Robert D. Kernohan (Edinburgh, 1999), p. 35.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-6.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 36.