On Tolerance - Sketch of a Christian Interpretation

Ioan Chirila

Pr. Prof. Ph.D., Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj, Romania
e-mail: ioanchirila@yahoo.com

The aim of the article is to provide a Christian interpretation to the concept of tolerance. The idea of tolerance is strongly related to the religion revealed by Jesus Christ. Moreover, Christianity is a religion that opens through love, thus tolerant.Religious tolerance in our era should be examined, as it is pointed out in the article, strarting from a reconsideration of the term of "Christian Church". The consensus over these matters would generate a genuine ecclesiastic co-citizenship and place the human person within the completeness of an anthropos liturgos.

We attempt to understand ourselves through the others and then we find in them what we perhaps lack, while at the same time we refuse to admit this and instead we burst out with pride, hate and envy. Conversely, once we notice a shortcoming similar to our own we turn again into sensitive, cheerful and tolerant beings. Why is this so? Because we have not yet discovered our own selves, in accordance with The One who brought into creation our ontos as a ressemblance of his own face towards an eternal bringing together for partaking in being in his way. One cannot find 'The proper being' as long as within one's self it has not become clear that 'what is yes should be yes' and 'what is no should be

KEY WORDS

religious tolerance, Christian faith, anthropos liturgos, Transylvania, civil tolerance, Orthodox, Greek-Catholic, homo tolerans

no', as long as one is the slave of 'maybe' and 'perhaps'. Orthos anthropos is the one through whom divine mercy and support are extended within the created world; these attributes share no common point with tolerance imposed by some status quo of despotism or helplessness. They are manifestations of divine providence meant to provide for our redemption. Is the Christian faith a religion of firmness when it falls within the realm of 'perhaps'? In this case it becomes sterile ritualism for which God shows no tolerance. The most convincing example in this respect is the attitude manifested by God towards his people in the time of the Prophets. Though God shows understanding, compassion and patience, these virtues can not be equated with tolerance. And this for the simple reason that the question of tolerance is tied to the existence of pluralism within a well-determined state, but in the Old Testament there is no talk of accepted religious pluralism[1] . The point of view from which this recognition occurs is predominantly Christian and it is not shared by the mono-personal monotheistic religious, while within Christianity itself it is only an energetic manifestation. This is the reason many theologians have come to believe that tolerance is the result of religious indifference[2]. For G. Chantraine, the idea of tolerance has strong ties with the religion revealed by Jesus Christ. Moreover, in one of his articles he attempts to elaborate on the contention that the concept of tolerance stems from the divine Revelation brought by Jesus Christ. Against this background he describes the evolution of religious tolerance in the 16th century. The starting point of his demonstration is the ancient polis. In the ancient polis, and also in ancient Egypt and Babylon, political and religious unity were constitutive to each other. Tolerance, if it existed, was delimited by the political authority. A city, a kingdom, could not tolerate other gods, as this would have compromised or even destroyed their political unity. Idols other than the official ones could have been tolerated only to the extent they were not undermining or threatening the state. However, with Christianity, says Chantraine, the framework changed. The deity is a Trinity who is accessible through love, thus tolerant[3]. The author even provides an exemplification that should work for justifying his personal inference by invoking the episode with the Samaritan woman in the Bible. He upholds that in this case the Saviour was tolerant. This interpretation does not convince us for the following reasons: the woman becomes an apostle for the people in Sihar and these are apparently converted after the preaching of Jesus. In consequence, it is not possible to equate tolerance and the act of allowing some time for the work of redemption. Such interpretations are far-fetched and thus subjective, considering that the text of the Scripture is the main basis for dogmatic expression, while in the field of dogmas there is no concept of tolerance. Sometimes even in the area of moral life, the Apostles are unwilling to allow for this time and those in question are excommunicated. Interconfessional dialogue has its shades of tolerant manifestation, but it should not be forgotten that its main purpose is to reach a common truth which is the revelation of Christ. It follows then that this concept

We shall now proceed to an analysis of the secular concept of tolerance, a concept that is reflective more of individual autonomy than of a communal structure originating in the initial unity and harmony of creation, from whose structure stems natural law as a foundational norm. However, for technical reasons, we shall make use of the concept of religious tolerance, bearing in mind that while it is multi-confessional rather than multi-religious, it is nevertheless operable.

Tolerance – a juridical concept or a norm of living together in a free society?

In order to define the concept of tolerance in a manner as accessible to understanding as possible, we shall have to specify from the very beginning that we are operating in the present study with two concepts of tolerance, one civil and the other religious. More and more often it is said that civil tolerance had found a *terminus a quo* during the seventeenth century, that societies seen as eminently democratic have manifested during their histories attitudes of extreme intolerance, that today, more than ever, there is a need for a concrete manifestation of civil and religious tolerance, meaning the establishment of irenic relations among peoples and, as much as possible, a restructuring of the social sphere along principles that would be of a trinitary-commmunal – and thus ecclesiastical - nature.

Our study wishes to be a case analysis that would reveal the area zone where civil and religious tolerance overlap, in a manner close to the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur[4]. Ricoeur has said that the political relates firstly to the field of economics and only secondarily to the realm of ethics. This an empirical criterion that introduces the concept of succession or of contractual time pre-eminence. From this concept can be easily derived the conclusion that secular tolerance is the term through which an owner of the material civilization and guardian of a spiritual civilization allows for and facilitates similar conditions for his co-citizen. Within this framework, in the language of the enlightened absolutism, no recourse is made to the idea of a people, a nation, the accent being on the idea of citizenship, of a person with whom something is shared, the fact of living together translating into this sharing. A special dimension of civil tolerance is represented by religious tolerance. An extensive space in this text will be alloted to the aforementioned dimension, with the aim of delineating the exact organic relationship between the two, and bearing in mind that, from the theological perspective, the organic relation is: 'religious tolerance, a determining factor for civil tolerance.'[5] Religious tolerance is not the mere accident of civil tolerance. Rather, it is the concrete vertical transposition, the opening towards the transcendent, of the horizontal, contractual and immanent aspect of civil tolerance. This is why in most cases religious tolerance should be the factual expression of church doctrine, but within this doctrine there are limits for this tolerance, seen as a dialogue of which the function should be first of all pedagogic, i.e. of evangelisation. The biblical position in this matter,

providing for three steps of dialogue and eventually for the exclusion from the Church, is well-known. However, an accurate re-evaluation of the concept of religious tolerance will only be possible after re-considering the concept of Christian Church, of both its inclusive and exclusive meanings. Tolerance is a juridical, technical and theological term, but its most comprehensive theological meaning is the one of mercy, support and time for redemption. The acts or edicts of tolerance, beginning with The Milan Edict (313) or with the declaration of religious peace from Augsburg (1555) up to, in our case, the Civil Tolerance Edict of Joseph II (1781) are nothing but attempts to maintain by means of diplomacy[6] the unity of the Habsburg Empire. As soon as they reached the constitutive communities, they generated – in the case of Transylvania, for example – instances of intolerance. Moreover, as part of their genesis, there are two concepts that induce the social result to converge towards secularisation. In Ch. O'Brien's words[7], these are: the attempt to maintain the patrimonial unity of the house of Habsburg and of the Germanic empire, and the mutations which occurred at the cognitive level under the influence of Enlightenment.

Within the brief period that we make reference to, 1780 – 1790, the term tolerance included in Joseph's edict does nothing to change the sense of Leopold's Diplomas. Romanians were tolerated, from the ethnic and religious point of view, meaning that they were allowed to exist. However, the Edict emerges at a time when the Romanians already had a crystallised elite, one that would use for judicial and argumentation purposes the content of this Edict in order to promote their national ideal.

The Tolerance Edict from Transylvania

In order to provide our analysis with an objective basis, we reproduce here the content of Article 1 of the Complementary Decree of the „Merciful Governors": „non-Catholic citizens can erect a school or church of the type stipulated in our previous orders (circulare) if their number is 100 families" [8].The term non-Catholic covers in this case both Christian Orthodox and Jewish believers. The article opens the possibility for building up the two complementary fields – education and religion – through which the Emperor believed that harmonious living together could be achieved. Later on, in the vision of Metropolitan Saguna, these two could bring about a rapprochement to God – the source of authentic tolerance, tolerance that would eventually find a social expression as well. This is why religious tolerance also comprises a prophetic dimension. In the end, it is an eschatological reality, but until then it is also a liturgical, religious and cultural endeavour.

Coming back to the article of the Civil Tolerance Edict – see the Preamble of the Decree of 13 October 1781 – we note that its outcome was to put an end to the state of intolerance that had been established in Transylvania with this territory's inclusion in the Habsburg Empire and especially with its falling within

the sphere of action of the Counter-Reformation. Robert Horvath[9] showed in a study that this climate of intolerance, this denial of elementary rights pertaining to religion, had radically changed with the accession to regency of Joseph II. The young monarch understood with rapidity that instability within Hungary and Transylvania was a major obstacle against a positive evolution of monarchic principles in these territories. This is why he undertook the reforming task himself.

The politics of Joseph II, also know by the name of josephinism, enacted religious tolerance in a strict sense in order to achieve large scale civil tolerance. The latter could be identified, in his opinion, with the idea of establishing some sort of natural religion. Substituting religious ethics with a type of lay morality for the use of all citizen was, in the Emperor's opinion, a way to achieve everyone's equality before of the state. These ideas were in conformity with German theories of natural law put forth by Pufendorf, Thomasius and Wolff and by their Austrian disciples, Professors Beck, Martini and Sonnenfels[10].

Within a such a system, the citizens' formation and education held a prominent place. It professed the removal of education from under the jurisdiction of the Church and the implementation of state control over it, implying the subordination of education to state interests[11]. The finality of higher education was altered as well. Its purpose was no longer to attain scientific knowledge for better serving theology, but the promotion of scientific disciplines that could contribute to erecting the hereditary institutional framework of the empire as well as the instruction of state functionaries[12]. It is thus crystal clear that the basic structure of josephinism included the reform of education that was aimed in a direction obviously overshadowed by secularisation and whose final point was the achievement of large scale civil tolerance. The economic and administrative reforms that are much more numerous bear testimony in this respect.

Of all his reforms after 1790, it was only the Edict that continued to generate a diversity of attitudes throughout Empire. It is also true that the Catholic world itself experienced a quite obvious shift towards accepting the idea of tolerance, but the vision of a dominant Church continued to survive alongside this view[13].

The main achievement of the Tolerance Edict together with the decisions of the Diet of 1744 for the condition of Romanians in Transylvania was the fostering of unity between Orthodox and Greek-Catholic Romanians in the context of the struggle for national emancipation as well as the setting up of an extensive educational network.

K. Hitchins[14] has noted in this respect, „the reformatory zeal of Joseph II represented another impulse for the activity of Romanian Aufklaerers. Despite the fact that he shared the ideals of the Enlightenment – rationalism in governance, religious tolerance, and the end of injustices caused by servitude – in his politics he guided himself only by his desire to strengthen the power of central government at the expense of the local privileged classes"[15] – which translated into an atti-

tude of intolerance towards the Romanian Transylvanians on the part of the aristocratic representatives of the three privileged nations. This kind of tolerance edict that eventually brings about intolerance falls within the ambit of political compromise made solely for the sake of politics. Hitchens continues by noting: "the effect for Transylvania of his reforms was a shattering of the very foundation of the authority of the three nations...he weakened the power of the feudal state over the servants...he offered the Romanians the framework within which to work for emancipation"[16].

Tolerance – beyond theoretical discourse or political and administrative decisions

We noted above that Joseph II saw in religious tolerance a transitional way towards civil tolerance and that this represented a manner of getting entangled in the saeculum. We were also suggesting that the ideal of religious tolerance embraces the form of *logos* and has a trinitary structure, that it has dialogue as a foundation and communion as a finality, at least in faith. What do we note as having a pedagogical function during the decade of josephinian tolerance?

1. The creation of premises generating *lex tolerantia* from the dialogues with society, upon listening to its needs.

2. Equidistance towards radicalised religious aspects. I mean here the relations with the Holy Sea, beginning with Pope Paul IV and until Pius VI, who signed the concordat with Joseph II, the concordat that would regulate the Empire's relations with the Vatican for a period of 50 years.

3. The objective analysis of the spirit of the time. As a negative factor in this respect should be noted inconstancy, the ending of reforms by their very initiator.

All these elements could be included in today's church policy. In what manner? I listen, I share my faith, I do not try to impose it, but I let the person choose and, *in extremis*, I am not a heretic, I pray for that person. Religious tolerance in our era should proceed, as said before, from a reconsideration of the term of Christian Church. This redefinition could be carried out in a completely objective manner, submitting for dialogue the dogmatic sum of the Ecumenical Synods, each part presenting the dynamics of the tradition followed by them and the manner in which the Scriptures were observed until Laodicea. The consensus over these matters would generate a genuine ecclesiastic co-citizenship and restore the human person to the fullness of an *anthropos liturgos*. Being himself an epiphany of Christ, he would become a *homo tolerans*. The best exemplification in this respect is the prayer of the Great Ektenia from the Holy Liturgy: "let us pray to the Lord for the unity of all Churches."

Christian tolerance is in fact prayer for those still walking in the darkness of ignorance.

Notes:

* Translated by Claudia Muresan

1 Asist. drd. Gelu Calina, Preliminarii la problemele tolerantei, in MO, no. 1 – 4, 2002, p.122.

2 Andre Latreille, apud Georges Chantraine, La doctrine catholique de la tolerance au XVIe siecle, Actes du V-eme Colloque Jean Boisset, 1987, Universite de Montpellier III, p.1.

3 G. Chantraine, quoted work, p. 1-18.

4 Paul Ricoeur, Eseuri de hermeneutica, translated by Vasile Tonoiu, Ed. Humanitas, Bucuresti 1995, p. 231-300.

5 Ioan Chirila, Problema tolerantei în Transilvania în epoca iosefina, in Toleranta si convietuire în Transilvania secolelor XVII- XIX, Limes Publishing House, Cluj Napoca, 2001, p. 132-137.

6 C. O. Brien, Ideas of Religions Toleration at the Time of Ioseph II. A Study of Enlightenment among Chatolics in Austria, 1969, apud Roland Crahay, La tolerance civile, Universite libre de Bruxelles, 1982, p. 50.

7 Ibidem, p. 50.

8 Ibidem, p. 52.

9 R. Horvat, apud R. Crahay, quoted work, p. 123.

10 C. O. Brien, quoted work, p. 50.

11 Ibidem, p. 52.

12 R. Horvat, p. 123.

13 O. Brien, quoted work, p. 50.

14 K. Hitchins, Constiinta nationala si actiune politica la românii din Transilvania – 1700 –1868, Dacia Publishing House, Cluj Napoca 1987, p. 62-82.

15 Ibidem, p. 64.

16 Ibidem, p. 82.