



Marina V. Vorobjova

Religious Tolerance as the Basic Component of Inter-Religious Dialogue

Abstract: The problem of religious tolerance is of supreme importance in the contemporary world. Just as, a few centuries ago, many wars were provoked by religious motifs, so today clashes on religious grounds provoke military conflicts that have long overgrown the walls of churches and mosques and keep growing in spite of the sacred traditions of the religions themselves. "Orientation to love" fails to work, and the "neighbor" becomes an enemy if he does not confess the same religion. Where shall we search for the reason behind religious hostility? What is the history of intolerance? Who was the first to throw the stone that shook the foundations of peaceful coexistence of particular families and whole states? We propose to turn to the following themes: 1. World religions and relations between them (on the question of Christian-Judeo-Islamic dialogue) 2. Relations inside world religions (on the example of Christian confessions) 3. Interrelations between world religions and new religious movements.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:
Director of Religious
Studies Research Center
"Ethna", St. Petersburg,
Russia. E-mail:
info@upelsinka.com

I would like to begin my article with a simple example, quoted from a 1969 article by *Joseph Campbell*.¹

"There are lamps on the ceiling. Each lamp shines independently from other lamps and, therefore, they can be seen as self-sufficient objects or a variety of empirical facts. <...> Each lamp is a source of light and it is one light, not a variety of lights. We can say that all lamps provide light and that is why we can talk not only about a variety of lamps but also about the unified nature of light. More than that, if one of the lamps breaks it is easily replaced by another lamp and light remains the same. Thus, the one light shows itself in a variety of lamps."

The variety of lamps is not only the variety of persons in this world. This variety of empirical facts is the variety of everyone's perception of the environ-

KEYWORDS:

religious tolerance, religious tradition, ideology, atheism curtain, Russian Orthodox Church, the other, interreligious relations in Russia

ment and it comes forth before us in the unified nature of light. In the same way, the variety of points of view may be presented in a dialogue in which those who talk strive for union that would allow them to hear and be heard.

Striving for tolerance is a special feature of the contemporary world. The state of things not only in the sphere of religion, but also in all spheres of public life, depends on the firsthand task of achieving religious tolerance.

Just as, a few centuries ago, many wars were provoked by religious motifs, today clashes on religious grounds provoke military conflicts which have long overgrown the walls of churches and mosques and keep growing in spite of the sacred traditions of the religions themselves. "Orientation to love" fails to work, and the "neighbor" becomes an enemy if he does not confess the same religion.

Where shall we search for the reason behind religious hostility? What is the history of intolerance? Who was the first to throw the stone that shook the foundations of peaceful coexistence of particular families and whole states?

These are questions that humanity has been raising throughout its existence. But it seems that religious conflicts have never covered such vast territories as they have in the 20th century. Just open an edition of "A Touchstone Book," turn to The Atlas "The State of Religion,"² and you will find proof of this. On one of the maps – Religion at War – all of the Oriental world is "burning in flames" of religious war,³ in Europe such "fires" can be seen in Northern Ireland and in Bosnia & Herzegovina, in Africa, religious wars exist in the south of Sudan and in other

places. The territories of Canada and the United States seem colorless, which testifies to superficial calmness and peace in the sphere of religious relations.

However, this map marks only on-the-surface places of war that have long ago grown past the status of "local" wars and simply cannot be overlooked by world society. Who can count the number of unacknowledged religious clashes taking place in this or that country, in one or another town?

Dr. David Rozen (Jerusalem), who's article was published in a Russian-language edition of "Dialogos. Religion and Society," says: "To our great shame even if religion is not the true source of conflict it often turns out to worsen the situation rather than help in solving it."⁴

*James Wood*⁵ believes that every religious tradition claims its own uniqueness and priority (or at least assumes to have them); teachings calling for tolerance are exceptions. To prove this point he says that there have been more wars in the name of religion "than for any other reason." This view is corroborated by the fact that religion is one of the main categories of armed conflicts.⁶

At the conference "Tolerance: Uniting Our Efforts," which took place in Russia, *Douglas Remedge*, the author of "Islam, Democracy and Ideological Tolerance" delivered a report as a representative of the "Asia" Fund in Indonesia. The report was called "Strengthening of Tolerance, Building a Democracy: Civil Society in Indonesia," and reported on the state of things in Indonesia and on the "Asia" Fund programs there conducted to support the ideology of tolerance.

I would also like to illustrate my article with concrete examples taken from the Russian case. I hope that firsthand information about what steps Russians are taking towards tolerance and equally about steps we sometimes take in the opposite direction will be of interest to the readership of this periodical.

Let me right away mark that I do not think it is possible to use these few pages to provide a history of religious tolerance in Russia, much less to describe the contemporary state of things in this sphere in Russia. However, I hope that several moments that I would like to underline will help to illuminate the approximate circle of problems we run into in Russia.

At the present moment we are observing a rise in the number of religious movements all across Russia. First of all this has to do with changes in the national structure of the population of Russian regions.⁷ According to the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation statistics for January 1, 2004 there are 11525 registered organizations of the Russian Orthodox Church; 3537 Muslims organizations; 1467 organizations of Christians of the Gospel Faith (Pentecostals); 979 organizations of evangelical Baptist Christians; 698 organizations of evangelical Christians; 646 organizations of Seventh Day Adventists; 267 organizations that confess Judaism (198 of these confess Orthodox Judaism and 69 confess Reformed Judaism); there are 253 Catholic parishes (5 of these are Greek Catholics and 248 belong to the Roman Catholic Church); there are 219 Lutheran communes; there are 192 organizations

the members of which confess Buddhism, and so on, for a total of 21664 registered religious communes.⁸

Of course, such an imbalance and superficial superiority of Christians over other religions (and Orthodoxy over other Christian confessions) may lead us to think that Russia is a purely Orthodox country and, therefore, that rights and advantages should be given to the Orthodox. However, this point of view, widely supported by the Orthodox Church hierarchy, has a very shaky foundation.

First of all, researchers of religion point out that the “religious boom” in Russia ended in middle 1990-ies and the numbers of Orthodox commonly mentioned as evidence of the “boom” (it is commonly said that about 80-90% of the population are Orthodox believers) does not reflect reality and is not supported by sociological opinion polls, which show that the percentage of people who affiliate themselves with the Orthodox Church is much lower then that in the official data.⁹ Such opinion polls usually deal with self-identification, which is often much more critical than the official data fixating so-called nominal Orthodox. Another important figure is the proportion of believers in various Russian regions. For example, the percentage of Buddhists in Burjatiya is much higher then in central Russian regions, and the number of Muslims in Tatarstan is much higher then the number of Muslims on the Sakhalin Island (Far East).

Thus, in spite of the significance of the “historical traditionality” argument, we need to take into consideration the multinational nature of Russia that justifies the presence of various beliefs on Russian territories.

Why are we talking about this here and now? It would be strange to talk about religious intolerance in the context of the epoch of atheism, when believers of *any* confession were equal because of their status of “asocial” and “procommunist” “elements.” Situations testifying to religious intolerance between believers simply could not arise because of political reasons. Conflicts appeared and grew for political reasons after the fall of the “atheism curtain.” Believers whose rights had previously been equally violated begin to compete for supremacy within a particular territory after they acquire these rights. Why do believers often flee the very opportunity for inter-religious dialogue after they have survived an epoch of total rule of atheism?

We think the answer to this question is, first of all, in the fact that religion cannot stay as a separated sphere in the circumstances of contemporary life. Undoubtedly, religion borders other spheres of public life; not only does it border them, but it also tries to actively participate in them.

It is exactly for this reason that the Russian Orthodox Church conflicts with the Vatican: these conflicts first of all have political roots (the very same roots that have been at the foundation of many conflicts between Orthodoxy and Catholicism in Russia during the last several centuries). It was political motivation that moved the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to deny giving a visa to Dalay-Lama in 2003.¹⁰ This also explains the uneasy relationships between representatives of “traditional” religions and representatives of newer religious that came to Russia more than a hundred years or just a few decades ago.

However, it would not be right to attribute all problems to “outer” features of religions, i.e. to their political and social aspects. Undoubtedly, the inner foundation of world religions may also provide a particular sort of isolation and an absence of desire for dialogue.

Some researchers (for example, *Frederic Lamond*,¹¹ who suggests his own theory called “Dialectical Pantheism”) believe that the very nature of monotheism contains the roots of religious intolerance. Monotheism denies polytheism and, therefore, provides a way of understand the One Truth that denies other truths.

Let us note that relationships between world monotheistic religions, as a rule, turn out a little better than those between monotheistic and polytheistic religions. However, there are also particular “submerged reefs” here on which ships of whole nations founder.

As for new religious movements, this is usually the pinnacle of tension in the development of inter-religious relationships. Although it does not always show itself blatantly and is not necessarily the cause of the bloody scenes that are all too common in the world, the stand between new and old religions often gives the most glaring examples of religious intolerance.

The following is one example. When the word “sect” is entered in the search system of *EastView Information Service* database, the result includes more than 700 links to articles published in Russian during 2004. The majority of these publications are stark testimonies to a negative image of “alien religions” (new religious movements) provided by the

media;¹² they simply cannot be a bridge that would be made between believers of different religions (particularly in cases of religious minorities). It is often not only a negative image that we see given to us by the media, there are known cases of blunt perversion of facts by journalists.¹³

A special source of worry is activity of Orthodox religious centers that aim at uprooting “sects” in Russia. These often have contacts with anticult movements of Western Europe.¹⁴

Karl Kozlovic names seven parameters of dialogue that were identified in literature in his article “Who Should Be Allowed to Participate in Official Interreligious Dialogues?”¹⁵ They are the following:

1. *Participant Sanctioning: Official Recognition* (carefully picked participants of the dialogue)
2. *Representation: Are Participants Truly Faithful to the Faith?* (partners in dialogue must be people with a firm standpoint in their own religion)
3. *Relevancy: Insiders or Outsiders of the Faith?* (K. Kozlovic: “Whether insiders or outsiders are ultimately chosen as representatives, they must at least think/believe/behave like true religious insiders”¹⁶)
4. *Knowledgeable: Understanding Oneself and the Other* (one must not only remember his/her own faith, they also have to obtain a corresponding knowledge about the other’s faith)
5. *Technical Competence: Argumentation and Presentation Skills* (acquiring of skills necessary for a deeper theological dialogue¹⁷)
6. *Articulate: Knowing the Language of the Dialogue* (being able to use terminology in an argument)

7. *Appropriateness: Issues of Dress and Other Nonverbal Behaviors* (getting acquainted with cultural differences in nonverbal behavior)

As we can see, here the difference and unlikeness of the *other* is underlined. A desire to hear the *other* in interreligious dialogue is nothing other than tolerance. We are not talking about our enclosed, subjective world, but about an effort to cross its borders and find out about the *other’s* perception of the world, while at the same time remaining who we are.

In one of his articles written in 1970 (known in Russia under the name of “Religious Stand Between the East and the West”), *Joseph Campbell* turns to the problem of a stand between the East and the West in the sphere of religion. He states that “Western religions explain how to establish and maintain a proper relationship with a named God.”¹⁸ As a response to this the East justly replies: “I do not see a religion there!”¹⁹ The reason for this is, as *Campbell* points out, that “Here in the West we named God or, to be more exact, we found out what his name is from a book, which came to us from strange places and times. We were taught to believe not only in absolute existence of this metaphysical fiction, but also in the fact that it influences our life. In the East it is the contrary – the main attention is paid to experience and feelings and not those of the others, but of oneself.”²⁰

Thus, there is no dialogue, because there is no understanding of the *other*. And it means that our discussion is in different languages – we are like aliens on our own planet.

Yes, at times it really is very difficult for us to understand each other, sometimes our dialogue remains altogether unfinished. What could be some practical recommendations?

One of these recommendations is well described by a priest quoted in a Caritas practical handbook.²¹ This priest who works to prevent conflict between Muslim and Hindu communities in the slums of Ahmadabad, India, tells that when he tries to talk people out of religious fighting he says: "I am not asking you to stop being a Muslim or a Hindu, I am asking you to be a good Muslim or a good Hindu."²²

As a researcher of religion I cannot overlook the fact that studying history of religions helps a great deal in inculcating a tolerant attitude towards others. We strive for understanding of the essence of a way of thinking previously unknown to us and respect a strange religious culture. This means that we have a chance to listen to others and be heard in religious dialogue. Of course, such understanding and respect can only be acquired if we have an unbiased attitude towards the movement we study and if we use sources that help us get an objective understanding instead of persuading others that we are right.

Unfortunately, in our country such objective research is frequently replaced by confessional evaluations that do not support development of interreligious dialogue in the future, but rather worsen the situation of religious intolerance and lessen trust. The only thing that can help us is having full information on matters of religion and the desire to find out more and not to force our own ideas onto someone.²³

References:

1. Tolerance: uniting efforts: Conference materials/ Composed and edited by I.N. Genisheva. Moscow, 2002.
2. Jeffrey Bloechl. *Have We Need of Invoking Postmodernity? Identity and Difference in Theological Discourse*. Postdoctoral Research Associate, Belgian Fund for Scientific Research (Flanders). *Journal for Christian Theological Research*. 4:1 1999.
3. Joseph Campbell. *Myth to live by* / Foreword by Johnson E. Fairchild. Kiev, Moscow, 2002.
4. Karl Kozlovic. *Who Should Be Allowed to Participate in Official Interreligious Dialogues? A Review of Issues* / Marburg Journal of Religion. Volume 6, No. 2 (June 2001).
5. Frederic Lamond. *Possible Reasons for Monotheistic Religious Intolerance* / Materials of International Conference "Religion and Democracy: an exchange of experience between East and West"? organized by CESNUR (2003). http://www.cesnur.org/2003/vil2003_lamond.htm
6. Michael Pye. *Reflecting on the plurality of religions* / Marburg Journal of Religion. Volume 2 , No.1 (May 1997).
7. Michael Pye. *The study of religions and the dialogue of religions* (Shûkyôgaku to shûkyôtaiwa) / Marburg Journal of Religion. Volume 6, No. 2 (June 2001).
8. Marina V. Vorobjova. *On the way to the dialogue: choice of modern Russia* / "Religion and Law", No. 2 (30) (2003). Pp. 7-8.
9. Marina V. Vorobjova. *Traditional and nontraditional: paradoxes of coexistence*. Materials of In-

ternational Conference “Religion and Democracy: an exchange of experience between East and West”? organized by CESNUR (2003).

http://www.cesnur.org/2003/vil2003_vorobjova.htm

Notes:

¹ Joseph Campbell. *Zen*. Quoted from the Russian edition: Joseph Campbell. *Myth to live by*, p. 124.

² *A Touchstone Book*, Simon and Shuster, 1993.

³ *The State of Religion Atlas*. Religion at War, No. 25. Pp. 66-67.

⁴ *Dia-Logos: Religion and Society 2000. Almanac/* Composition and general edition by Mark Smirnov. Moscow, 2001. P. 405.

⁵ same.

⁶ Three categories are commonly marked out: 1. Interstate conflict; 2. Revolutionary conflict; 3. Conflict with “the others”. – *Ways of Reconciliation. A Caritas Handbook*. Saint-Petersburg, 2000.

⁷ L. À. Andreeva, V. V. Ryakhovsky. *Interconfessional relations. Orthodoxy, Protestantism and a strategy for solid development of Russia in the beginning of the 21st century* in Social Sciences and the modern world, No. 3/ 2004. Pp. 143-152.

⁸ Contents and numbers of religious organizations and filials of foreign religious organizations in the Russian Ministry of Justice lists for January 1, 2004. Published on an informational portal “Religion and the media” (<http://www.religare.ru>).

⁹ We should also note, that during listings of population both during the Soviet times and in post Soviet Russia confession was never a subject of inquiry. – See L. À. Andreeva, V. V. Ryakhovsky.

¹⁰ “Dalay-Lama is denied a visa”. <http://www.ebiblioteka.ru/sources/article.jsp?id=5319524>

¹¹ http://www.cesnur.org/2003/vil2003_lamond.htm

¹² It is enough to name several titles of some articles of the Russian press: “Sects Walk Russia” (“Stavropolskaja pravda”), “Forced into “The Valley of the Sun” (“Russian Courier”), “Beware: Sects! Children of New Gods” (“Slovo”), “Believe – Don’t Believe, or “Married” to a Sect” (“Kubanskije Novosti”) etc.

¹³ July 7, 2004. The Slavic Center of Human Rights sent out a news letter in which it said that the Grand Jury of Reporters of the Russian Council of Reporters will conduct a hearing following a filing of charges by the “Fakel” (*rus.* – torch) Evangelical Church on the “Vremechko” television show. On May 17, 2004 a program on “TV-Tzentr” (*rus.* – “TV-Center”) channel showed a piece filed by candid camera in a Moscow “Fakel” evangelical church on April 25, 2004. “Searching for a sensation that would boost ratings of the show reporters showed untrue information that perverted reality and what they did falls under part 2, section 129 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation (lies in the media), – said Anatoly Pchelintzev – a Slavic Center of Human Rights lawyer.

¹⁴ For example the “Dialogue” center operating in Ukraine.

¹⁵ Karl Kozlovic, *Who Should Be Allowed to Participate in Official Interreligious Dialogues? A Review of Issues*.

¹⁶ Same.

¹⁷ These skills could be language, knowledge, communication skills etc.

¹⁸ Quoted from a Russian language edition: Joseph Campbell, *Myth to live by*. P. 93.

¹⁹ Same. P. 90.

²⁰ Same. P. 93.

²¹ *Ways of reconciliation. A Caritas Handbook.*

²² Same. P. 87.

²³ My colleagues from the Religious Studies Research Center “Ethna” and I are planning to cover the subject of interreligious relations in Russia in detail in one of our projects. This project is called “Interreligious relations in Russia” and presents a multimedia encyclopedia on CD. The Russian language version will come out approximately in March of 2005. Unfortunately, because of financial limitations (only volunteers work for our organization and at the moment they are working on several projects already) we will not be able to present an English language version for our Western colleagues any earlier than December of 2005. We invite everyone interested to participate in our project. For more detailed information please see our site at (<http://ethna.upelsinka.com>).