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Compassion or Toleration? Two Approaches to Pluralism

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Thank you, Your Highness. What a wonderful building!

Why do we need pluralism? Let's just look at the world where, right now, we are seeing a disease of nationalism, possibly nationalism at its last gasp. The nation-state, which is so familiar to us now, is a fairly new creation. It was impossible to achieve a national consciousness before modern communications enabled all members of society to get to know about fellow-countrymen who lived far away from them. But very early in the history of the nation-state, the British historian Lord Acton (1834-1902) made a chilling prediction.

He said that the emphasis in the nation state on ethnicity, culture and language would make it very difficult for people who did not fit the national profile. In some cases, he said, with chilling accuracy, they could be enslaved or even exterminated. Not long after that, the Young Turks massacred over a million Armenians to create a purely Turkic state; later came the Nazi Holocaust, and, in the closing years of the twentieth century, there were concentration camps

again on the outskirts of Europe in Bosnia, this time with Muslims in them – the result of a lethal mix of Serbian nationalism and a debased form of Serbian Christianity.

A great deal of this is the result of egotism. I am currently writing a book about Scripture in all religious traditions. All scriptures insist that to achieve enlightenment we must let the ego go in an act of *kenosis* or 'self-emptying'. Nationalism is all about ego – it encourages a swelling of national pride that often entails the exclusion or the downgrading of the 'other,' as Lord Acton predicted. This is now in evidence again. When the Berlin Wall came down, there was dancing in the street. This time, during the most recent US presidential elections, people were cheering at the prospect of a wall being built between the United States and Mexico.

We are hearing much strident egotism in our political discourse and when this is combined with religion, it denies a basic truth about religious spirituality, which requires the surrender of the ego. Through the prostrations of *salat*, a Muslim learns the meaning of *islam*, a word that means 'surrender'. The Quraysh, the Meccan aristocracy, were horrified to see the first Muslims bowing to the ground like slaves. But these prostrations teach the body, at a level deeper than the rationalism, what *islam* requires. Instead of an ego that prances and preens and draws attention to itself, Muslims touch the earth with their foreheads.

When dealing with other faiths, we should be aware of how little we know. Unlike other disciplines, religion is about unknowing. It confronts the ineffable, the indescribable. What we call 'God', however, has often got narrowed down and made all too 'effable', during the modern period. This has made 'God' an idol. As a Roman Catholic child, I had to learn this definition of God in the catechism. The question was: 'What is God?' and, quick as a flash, without a moment's hesitation, we chanted: 'God is the Supreme Spirit, who alone exists of Himself and is infinite in all perfections.' At eight years old, this did not mean much to me. But I now see that it is fundamentally incorrect, because it assumes that one can simply draw breath and *define*, a word that literally means 'to set limits upon', a reality that transcends all categories and certainties. Many religious traditions emphasize this, reminding us of how little we know – especially about the divine. So when we say to people of other faiths: 'You are wrong' or 'We have a superior understanding of God,' this is pure egotism. It is also a complete mistake.

In India, during the tenth century BCE, the Brahmin priests used to hold a competition. Its purpose was to find a formula for the *brahman* ('the All'), the ultimate reality, which was not a clearly-defined God located firmly in the heavens. The *brahman* was All That Is. A priest would open proceedings by drawing upon his knowledge and scholarship in an attempt to define the Brahman. The other competitors would listen, think and respond, each contribution more learned than the last. But the winner was the priest who reduced the company all to awed silence. And in that silence, the *brahman*'s presence was felt. It was not experienced in the wordy definitions and declarations of what the Ultimate Reality was, but was present in the sudden realisation of the impotence of speech.

I think that when we stridently talk today about who is right and who is wrong, which tradition is the true one and which has irreparable flaws, we have lost this sense of the ineffable. We no longer understand that when we talk about God, we simply do not know what we are talking about. Thomas Aquinas, the great thirteenth century theologian who tried to rationalise Christianity, is chiefly remembered for his famous Five Proofs for God's existence, based on Aristotle and the great Muslim theologian and mystic Ibn Sina (whom Thomas calls Avicenna), whom – at the time of the Crusades! – Thomas quotes with great respect. Thus, he says, God is the Highest Excellence, the Prime Mover, the Uncreated Being, etc. etc. At the end of each 'proof', he concludes: that is *quod omnes dicunt Deum*, which can be translated: 'That is roughly what we mean when we talk about God.' But then – and this is the bit nobody reads anymore – Thomas pulls the rug from under our feet, saying: But we don't know what it is we have proved! All we have discovered is the existence of a mystery. We have no idea what a First Mover is or an Uncreated Being. Every being that we know derives from something else, is weak, impermanent and flawed.

Thomas's massive oeuvre can be seen as an attempt – a kind of mystical exercise, like the Brahmodya – to make his readers realise that when we are talking about the divine, we have come to the end of what words and thoughts can do. Ibn Sina, Maimonides, and the Brahmins would all have agreed with him. The cry *Allah Hu Akbar!* – God is always Greater than we can conceive – daily summons Muslims to prayer. As a young woman, I was very attached to a 14th century mystical text called *The Cloud of Unknowing*. At one point the young monk whom the author is instructing asks: 'Well, what do you think God is?' And the author replies: 'I have to

tell you, that I do not know; I have no idea'. He did not mean that he was what we now call 'an agnostic.' Nor was he simply dodging the issue. He knew that we are talking about something that our minds simply cannot encompass. Whatever the Catholic Catechism claimed, God is not *a* being – not even the Supreme Being, which is simply the top of a series of other beings. God does not even 'exist' in any way that we can understand. God, Thomas said, is simply *Esse Seipsum*, 'Being Itself.'

We, however, are all 'beings' and we are all imperfect. There was a time when we were not here and a time when we will no longer exist. We fail. We die. The idea of a God, stuck in the Heavens, arranging the universe like a human artisan, began with Sir Isaac Newton in the 18th century. He called this God 'Dominion' and said that 'He' (ridiculous pronoun!) was 'clearly very well-versed in Mechanicks and Geometry'. Newton had clearly created a god in his own image and likeness. But this reductive idea of God became current in the West – even after Newtonian physics was disproved. Western Christians became convinced that we could prove God's existence and that religion could be true in the same way as science.

Once you have a misplaced confidence in your knowledge of God, it is easy to condemn the beliefs of others. *We* know what God is and other people just don't. But there was a reaction against Newtonian certainty in the Romantic Movement of the early nineteenth century. The British poet William Wordsworth said that he had 'learned' – that he had taught himself – to look at the natural world in an entirely different way.

I have felt

A presence that disturbs me with the joy

Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime

Of something far more deeply interfused,

Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,

And the round ocean and the living air,

And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:

A motion and a spirit that informs

All thinking things, all objects of all thought,

And rolls through all things.

('Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey', 93-102)

It is a perfect expression of *Esse Seipsum,* Being Itself. It is omnipresent; we feel it within ourselves and in the natural world.

We need, perhaps, to rethink our terminology. The word 'tolerance' is often used in connection with pluralism, but I think we need to revisit this word. It comes, as you know, from the Latin *tolerare*, which means 'to endure', 'to put up with something'. It is rather grudging and we now need a more whole-hearted embrace of other views. Tolerance was an Enlightenment word, favoured by John Locke (1632-1704), who created the idea of the secular state. The secularised, liberal state, he said in his *Letter on Toleration,* could tolerate neither Muslims nor Catholics. He was engaged in the colonization of the Americas and also said that the native Americans had no inherent right to their land and that if they opposed British occupation they could be fought and killed. He also said that a master had absolute and despotic rights over a slave, which included the right to kill him at any time. This is the language of modern liberalism and it is also the language of the victor, the language of empire. Perhaps it needs to be revisited in what is supposed to be the age of equality.

I was drawn to Islam first because of its pluralism. The Qur'an has a generosity of outlook that we do not find in either the Jewish or the Christian scriptures. There are wonderful passages where the Qur'an lists all the prophets and says that it cannot make any distinction between them; they are all from God; and that you cannot be a *Muslim* unless you also accept the prophecy of Jesus, Abraham and Moses.

The Qur'an calls God the light of the world, which cannot be confined to a single lamp because it is ubiquitous. In a truly arresting verse, God says that if it had been God's will that all humankind should live in a single faith community, God would have arranged this - but it was

not God's will. Pluralism, therefore, is the will of what we call 'God.' The Arabs of the seventh century had no notion of an exclusive faith. They lived outside the great civilizations. They knew next to nothing about the warring orthodoxies currently raging in the Byzantine Empire, where Christians could not even agree about how they should regard Jesus – never mind how they should relate to other faith traditions. The Qur'an is offended by the idea that you must be either a Jew or a Christian. Instead, it insists that Muslims return to the spirit of Abraham, who had lived before the Torah and the Gospel, was neither a 'Jew' nor a 'Christian,' and had worshipped the One God before this primal faith had split into warring camps.

But, of course, Islam became an empire and in any empire you have 'toleration'. In every pre-modern empire, the religion of the ruling class was supreme and the others were 'tolerated.' That mitigated Islamic pluralism somewhat, but it was still far superior to Byzantium where Christians who did not accept the abstruse Christology of the Council of Nicaea were increasingly marginalised and where Jews and pagans were pressured into baptism. So when the Muslims arrived in the region, and made no such demands, they were greeted with relief.

But perhaps we can now move beyond 'tolerance' and embrace 'compassion'. This is not a very satisfactory word either, because the word has weakened over time; it is often associated today with something rather sweet, gentle and 'nice'. It is even associated with pity – with feeling sorry for people, which, again, puts one in a superior position vis-à-vis these poor souls. But if you return to the Greek and Latin root, you have *com-pathein* or *com-passio,* which means to 'feel' or 'endure' something *with* another person. So you are both on the same level. Compassion has been summed up in the 'Golden Rule', which was developed in every faith tradition and was regarded as essential to the religious life: 'Never treat others as you would not like to be treated yourself' or, as Confucius expressed it: 'Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.' You must, he said, use your own feelings as a guide to your treatment of others.

Compassion requires that you look into your own heart, discover what gives you pain, and then refuse, under any circumstance whatsoever, to inflict that pain on anybody else. And, Confucius insisted, you do not simply do this when you feel like it. Rather, you must make this practice habitual, something that you do 'all day and every day,' habitually dethroning yourself from the centre of your world, putting another there and expunging the ego. It is this, all the great sages and scriptures insist, that brings you to enlightenment. Not one of you can be a believer, said the

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), unless he desires for his neighbour what he desires for himself. In the early first century CE, Rabbi Hillel in Jerusalem was once asked by a pagan to sum up the whole of Jewish teaching while he stood on one leg. If he could do this, the pagan promised, he would convert to Judaism. Hillel stood on one leg and said: 'That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellows; that is the Torah and everything else is only commentary. Go and study it!'

These sages all insisted that you could not confine this compassion to your own group. You had to reach out to all peoples. The Confucians envisaged the enlightenment process as a series of endlessly-expanding concentric circles. You begin with yourself, making sure that you and your family are in good order. You cannot preach peace and love if your personal life is in disarray. But it cannot stop there. You then move out to the city in which you live and work hard to make the Golden Rule operative there. Then you extend your effort to the entire country in which you live; and finally, to the whole world. This cultivated empathy has no limits. You must reach out to the ends of the earth – an insight that is essential to us today.

'Love your enemies', said Jesus. 'Love' is another word that has been debased in the English language. 'Didn't you *love* that movie?' 'Don't you *love* Ice-cream?' It is often presented in a sentimental way. But Jesus was interpreting a ruling in the Hebrew Bible: The Book of Leviticus says: 'Love your neighbour' but Jesus took that a step further, saying, yes – love your neighbour, but also love your enemy. The Hebrew word translated here as 'love' was *hesed*, which meant 'loyalty'. It was a political term, used in international treaties in the ancient world. Two kings would promise to 'love' each other, which did not mean that they would fall into one another's arms and become affectionate friends. Rather, they would look out for one another's interests, come to their aid in time of trouble, take cognizance of that person's needs, even if this went against their short-term interests, and give him financial and military support. That is the kind of 'love' that, if we want a viable world, we must give to our 'enemies' today.

The sages who formulated the Golden Rule were not living in peaceful, idyllic societies; nor were they locked in prayer in the desert or on lonely mountain-tops. They were living in societies like our own, where violence had reached an unprecedented crescendo. In China, for example, during Confucius's time, the Chinese were embarking on the terrible period known as the 'Warring States', in which, for centuries, the states on the Great Plain of China fought one another in terrible wars until only one was left – and that became the Chinese Empire.

Today we too are living in a world of hatred, mistrust and escalating violence and, unless we learn to treat our enemies as we would wish to be treated ourselves, laying our own short-term interests to one side, the world will simply not be a viable place. One Chinese sage insisted that you must cultivate *jian ai* ('concern for everybody.') His name was Mozi and jian ai is often translated 'universal love'. But that was too romantic for Mozi, who was an extremely pragmatic person. But he insisted that we must regard other people's states as though they were our own. If we did that, we would not invade or fight them. We too must reach out to the enemy, and see things from their perspective – and that includes their religion.

All the scriptures insist on the absolute sacrality of every single human being, regarding everyone as special and unique. Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), the great Muslim mystic and philosopher, said that every single human person was an incarnation of one of God's hidden names. Each person was a unique and unrepeatable revelation of God to the world. We can deface that divinity within ourselves, but if we do, we will deprive the world of a unique revelation of God. And, of course, Ibn Arabi insisted, the divine Name inscribed within each one of us will reflect the faith tradition into which we were born. Jews will reveal their God in one way; Christians in another, Muslims in yet another. But each is valuable, crucial and essential. Ibn Arabi was returning to the pluralism of the Qur'an, which looks at the sanctity and legitimacy of all other faiths – not seeing them as second-rate, but as partners, because they reflect an aspect of the inimitable, ultimately unknowable God.

In the Hindu Upanishads, every single being – not only every single *human* being – has at its core an *atman*, which is its deepest, innermost self. And that atman is identical with the *brahman*, the Ultimate, the All. A tree, an insect, or a human person has this *atman*, and because it is so fundamental it is difficult to access it by normal thought-processes. But you had be aware of it, not only within yourself, but in every other person, animal or object. We each think ourselves as special and interesting, said one of the sages, but we all have that same sacred core. We are like rivers that all end up in the ocean. Once they have arrived in the ocean, they do not go around saying: 'Well, I am *this* river' or 'I am *that* river'. No. They are just 'the ocean', that is, just the divine.

Yet we are losing this sense of sacrality; we are failing to cultivate it. In London last year, seventy-two people were burned to death in Grenfell Tower, a council tower-block in the richest

borough in London, which had been given cheap, inadequate and highly flammable cladding. In our schools here in London, one of the richest cities in the world, a worrying number of children are hungry and ill-nourished. This is a disgrace and should make us uncomfortable. It has been said that 25 percent of the population of Britain is living in poverty. Yet we do not hear much about it.

The Buddha said that enlightenment was possible for every single sentient being. He himself came to Nirvana by developing a special form of yoga. He had tried the usual yogic disciplines but was not impressed by them because even though he had achieved some exotic yogic states, he was still his old, unruly and egotistic self. He achieved enlightenment by means of a compassionate form of yoga, in which he emitted thoughts of goodwill to all the corners of the earth – not unlike the Chinese concentric circles. The process was not complete until you sent out feelings of affection and concern for all, not omitting a single creature from this benign radius of concern. This too required a loss of ego. You are not loving people because they are doing something for you, are flattering you, or because they are rich in oil or gas. Rather you recognize that they are sacred and worthy of utter respect. This equanimity was what brought the Buddha to enlightenment, but he insisted that this had to be translated into practical, effective action in the world.

Secularism could be good for religion; it should free religion from the injustice that characterises every single state, since no state has ever achieved total equity. There has always been a degree of oppression and greed. And this should make us uncomfortable. But the trouble with secularism is that it has made many people wary of acting politically in any way at all. Locke said that religion was a ‘private search’ and should therefore be kept out of politics. The result has been that religion is all too often reduced to an ego trip – all about *my* personal relationship with God. But the scriptures – in every single tradition – insist that you must work creatively for the good of others, and not just those whom you find congenial. Practical action is essential to enlightenment.

After the Buddha had attained Nirvana, the inconvenient thought occurred to him that he should, perhaps, share his discoveries and show other people how they too could achieve this wonderful haven of interior peace. But no, he decided, I don’t want to do that. People do not want to lose their egos. They do not want to set themselves to one side. Preaching, the Buddha decided,

would be too depressing. When he heard this, the god Brahma, in the highest heaven, uttered a terrible cry: 'Then the world will be utterly lost!' He then descended from heaven and knelt before the Buddha – in Indian religion, the gods are lower than the enlightened human being. Lord, he said, please preach your *dharma*, your teaching and your way of life, because people are lost and in trouble. And the Buddha, says the Pali scripture, looked at the world with an eye of compassion, saw the ubiquitous suffering, and spent the next forty years of his life, tramping around the towns and villages of India to help people achieve his own liberating insight.

A person's religious ideas or beliefs were a matter of complete indifference to the Buddha. What was important was whether they practised compassion and kenosis, systematically laying their egotism to one side. He always adapted his teaching to the people he was addressing. He did not subscribe to the Hindu idea of the *atman*, for example, but when he was speaking to Hindu Brahmins, he used this idea to enable them to make their own way to enlightenment. One day, for example, he came across a crowd of Brahmins, who were trying to achieve a vision of Brahma. The Buddha had no interest in the *devas*, the gods of India. But he told the Brahmins: why don't you try to become like Brahma yourselves, an enlightened and enhanced being and instructed them in the importance of compassion and kenosis. Later Buddhists would adopt this policy when teaching others. It is called *upaya*: it requires you to enter sympathetically another's beliefs and special practices instead of making them so uncomfortable or dissatisfied with their faith. Theology, the Buddha insisted, was irrelevant when you are talking about the ineffable ultimate reality.

Religion, therefore, is not about belief. Originally, religion was something that you did rather than something that you thought or believed. In fact, our English word 'belief' has changed its meaning during the modern period. Religious people today are always asking: 'Do you *believe*', as though accepting certain theological propositions was the essence of the spiritual life. The word 'belief' derives from the Middle English *beleven:* which meant 'commitment' or 'loyalty'. During the 18th century, the word 'belief' became an intellectual consent to a rather dubious idea. One of the first people to use it in this sense was Newton, who wrote to a friend, explaining that when he started exploring the cosmos, it was with the hope 'that it would work for considering people for belief in a deity.' His scientific ideas would convince them that there was a God.

As a child, I was miserable because I was not convinced of the truth of the 'beliefs' that I had to adopt. Many of them seemed odd or incredible. But lack of belief, I was told, meant Hellfire for all eternity. I discovered that other people had different beliefs. Neither Jews nor Muslims believed in Jesus, though they claimed to believe in God. Were they all doomed to Hell? And how could a loving merciful God do this? I did not realise that this notion of 'belief" was a modern development. When the medieval poet Chaucer describes a knight saying to his lady: '*Accepte my bileve*', he was saying 'Accept my commitment, my loyalty.' The eleventh century theologian St Anselm once said: *Credo ut intellegam*: 'I believe in order that I may understand.' I used to think that this meant that I had to bludgeon my mind to accept all the 'beliefs' in my tradition and that then, as a reward, I would understand them – they would finally make sense. But the Latin *credo* ('I believe') comes from the Latin phrase *cor dare*: 'to give your heart'. Your faith will make sense to you when you commit yourself to it, acting it out in your daily life.

So all the problems arising from people's clashing 'beliefs' are irrelevant. I am going to end with a quotation from Ibn Arabi. I discovered it at a time when I was still hostile to religion and didn't believe in anything much. But this quotation chimed with what I had found in the Qur'an and what I was learning about all the great world religions, discovering their profound unanimity, despite their interesting and significant differences. I hope you find this quotation helpful too:

> Do not praise your own faith so exclusively that you disbelieve all the rest. If you do this, you will miss much good. Nay, you will fail to appreciate the real truth of the matter. God, the omnipresent and omniscient, cannot be confined to any one creed. For he says [in the Qur'an]: 'Wheresoever ye turn, there is the face of Allah.' Everybody praises what he knows. His God is his own creature, and in praising it he praises himself. Consequently, he blames the beliefs of other, which he would not do if he were just, but his dislike is based on ignorance.