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Religion, Peace and Tolerance AND WHY IT WAS SO IMPORTANT THAT POPE AND GRAND AYATULLAH SISTANI MET

by
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ABSTRACT

Jan Assmann famously accused monotheism as being the source of intolerance and interreligious violence. The article first establishes what tolerance means, namely not relativism, but respect for otherness. Indonesia, the country where one fifth of all Muslim live, is an example. Turning back to Assmann, the article points out that Assmann completely overlooks the most important fact of monotheism: That the monotheistic God is a God of grace and mercifulness. The article tries to point out, that tolerance will become real the more communication between religions is established. Indonesia can be taken as an example. Since the last 30 years we see growing, positive communication. A latest highpoint was the visit of Pope Francis with Grand Ayatollah al-Histani in

Najaf in 2021. On the background of ongoing violence, often involving religion, this getting to respect and love each other between the Pope and Muslim leaders is one of the most hopeful signs of our times.

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WHY ASK ABOUT RELIGION, PEACE AND TOLERANCE?

Do religions, or, better, does religion, have a problem with peace and tolerance? The answer is, of course, yes. Religions, many religions have great problems with tolerance. It seems difficult for religions to accept the other. The other "should not be", because they are others. This is the core of intolerance. In fact, history is full of terrible examples of religious intolerance. Up to this day people are stigmatized, excommunicated, persecuted, and killed because of their religion, by religious peoples, in the name of religion.

This is said to be **particularly true of monotheism**. In 2003 the German Egyptology Jan Assmann published a book¹ that became the object of heated discussions and the-

¹ Jan Assmann 2003, *Die mosaische Unterscheidung, oder Der Preis des Monotheismus*, München: Hanser, English: *The Price of Monotheist*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

ological seminars. In it Assmann proposed the thesis that monotheism entered religious intolerance and violence into history. Outside monotheism religions were part of the respective culture and therefore the question of which religions were the right one, could not arise. Every culture had its own religions. But what Moses brought down from Sinai was something new. It was the command "you shall not have other gods beside Me". With Moses came monotheism, the belief that there is only one God, and with this belief all other beliefs automatically became wrong beliefs. Monotheism entered the distinction between right and wrong religions, right and mistaken belief into humankind. But between what is right and what is wrong there can, indeed, be no tolerance. There is no tolerance between true and false. And so, according to Assmann, began the abominable history of religious intolerance, of persecuting people with "wrong" beliefs, of religious cleansing and killings, of brutality in the name of the true God and the true religion.

TOLERANCE NOT RELATIVISM

Let us leave Assmann for a moment. For our discussion of religious reasons for tolerance, it is important to understand what tolerance means. Tolerance is not relativism. Religious relativism means the opinion that all religions are the same, especially that it makes no sense to say that one religion is truer than another. Relativism rejects the truth value of religions. Religions are not true or false but fitting or less fitting.

Relativists regard religion as an option, depending on personal preferences. If you like to be religious, so be religious, if a certain religion attracts you, please join it – but do not say, I follow this religion because it is true.

But this kind of relativism, a consequence of philosophical agnosticism of the last two hundred years, is certainly wrong. Why? Because it does not fit with what Jews, Christians and Muslims believe. All three religions are convinced that what they believe is true, implying that what is in contradiction to their beliefs cannot be true. Relativism is a sign of extreme intolerance. It means that the relativist decrees that Christians are wrong believing, that Jesus is God's Savior for all people, and he or she forbids Muslim to believe that God sent His final truth and way to humankind, all humankind, in the form of the Holy Qur'an. Relativism is not tolerance, but extreme intolerance.

Tolerance is something else. It means respect towards others, different convictions, opinions and attitudes. It means respect for what is different: different traditions, different convictions, different religious teaching. Tolerance does not mean sharing in the convictions, opinions, and attitudes one tolerates. It means accepting what is different. Thus, tolerance is the attitude of a person, or persons, or a community that respects others, respects, especially, it respects the conscience of others.

Therefore, religious tolerance in a country means that the religious communities are prepared to respect all religious communities. In no way does it imply that they agree with the others. But they respect them. And because they respect them, they accept others as fellow citizens, as fellow human beings, thus they build positive human relations with them. They can live together in one community. They are not angered by the different faiths of others. They can become friends. And this means, tolerance generates peace.

TOLERANCE IN INDONESIA

Before I return to the central question of this paper – namely by religions should be tolerant towards each other – a short look to Indonesia will be helpful. Indonesia has, of course, experienced grave instance of intolerance, and incidents rooted in intolerance happen all the time. But what is much more impressive is the opposite: that religious tolerance is a reliable social fact in Indonesia. Tolerance is rooted in the multicultural character of Indonesia. In difference, f. i., to Germany where 60 years ago there were only Germans (except for a growing number of Italians that mostly sold their superior ice-cream to starving Germans), in Indonesia most Indonesians had experiences with fellow Indonesians that spoke another mother language, had different traditions and religious orientations. And thus, happened something on October 28, 1928, in – then – Batavia, the capital of Netherland's India which was most amazing. More than four hun-

dred young men from all over Indonesia: Muslims, Hindus, Catholics, Protestants and Buddhist that had come together made a formal oath to fight for "one country, Indonesia, one nation, the Indonesian nation, and one uniting language, the Indonesian language". Nationalism, or the longing for freedom and independence, united them. They accepted each other in their different tribal, racial and religious identities. What they pledged was expressed in the Declaration of Independence 17 years later by Sukarno and Hatta on August 17, 1945.

For extremely plural Indonesia acceptance of each other in each others specific identity was the condition for national unity within one state of Indonesia. There were two times when this will to unity, and thus to accept each other, made Indonesia succeed in an extremely inconvenient situation. Both cases involved the Muslim majority. At least 85 percent of all Indonesians are Muslim. But in 1945, after the Declaration of Independence when representative of all Indonesians decided on a constitution, the representatives of the big Muslim majority accepted that their religion, Islam, would not receive any special position in Indonesia's constitution. This became clear when the five principles of Pancasila, the Indonesian state philosophy first formulated by Sukarno,

was made the fundament of the Indonesian constitution.² A sentence extolling Islam was take out and Pancasila became the great Indonesian national consensus that Indonesia belongs to all Indonesians, without distinguishing between majority and minority. Because of Pancasila, Muslims could stay fully Muslims, Catholics fully Catholics, Hindus fully Hindus while becoming Indonesians. No doubt, Pancasila is the most fundamental expression of the tolerance of the Indonesian people towards each other: Pancasila means, Indonesians accept each other in their specific identity.

The second decisive time was the most dangerous period after the resignation of Indonesia's second president Soeharto in 1998. This was a time where people were afraid, Indonesia would experience the same destiny as the Soviet Union or Yugoslavia. It was a time of some bloody ethnic, social and religions conflicts. At that time, besides Miss Megawati Soekarnoputeri, daughter of Indonesia's first president Sukarno – she would become the fifth president of Indonesia – the politicians that brought Indonesia from a military dictatorship to a real democracy where people of strongly Muslim identity: Prof. B. J. Habibie, the successor of Soeharto, Abdurrachman Wahid, Habibie's successor and fourth Indone-

² The five principles of Pancasila are: "Belief in One God, just and civilized humanism, national unity, People's power (or: Orientation to the people), lead by the guidance of wisdom in common deliberation/representation, and social justice for the whole Indonesian people".

sian president, and Amin Rais, the chairman of the People's Congress that amended the old constitution by putting into it safeguards for the democratic character of the state and almost the whole set of internationally recognized human rights. These Muslim politicians would have had almost free hand to make Indonesia become an Islamic state, but they did not do so. The lead Indonesia to become a real democracy based on Pancasila.

These historical facts – the fact that Indonesia became and stayed an open, tolerant state – seem to prove that tolerance must somehow be deeply rooted in Indonesian culture, even, that it belongs to Indonesia's identity. Pancasila demands tolerance, and intolerant behavior is regarded as extremely negative by most Indonesians.

Now we must ask: Are there reasons within religion itself that demand religious tolerance? We turn back to Jan Assmann.

WHERE ASSMANN WENT WRONG

At a first look Assmann only seems all too obvious. The history of Israel and the Jewish people, of Christianity and of Islam are written in blood. Books like Sam Harris' *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York 2004), Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (London 2007) or Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Twelve/Hachette Book Group

2007) all make the point that humankind would be better off without religion. Monotheism with its distinction between true and false religions is, according to Assmann, "structurally intolerant". What is wrong must be eliminated, what is right should be in possession.

But there is one crucial point Assmann fatally overlooks. That the monotheistic God of Israel, Christianity, and Islam is not a blood thirsty dictator or an inquisitor that wants to purify humankind of everything wrong. God is, according to the deepest insight of these three religions first of all the Merciful! God does not want to destroy; God wants to heal and to save. He does not send the sinner gleefully to hell, but he longs to save him. It is true, the history of the three monotheistic religions is bloody. But this narrow-mindedness and violence is not what God commands, it is an aberration. Indeed, history, also the history of the monotheistic religions, is a learning process, where humans, looking to God, need much time to get rid of their original brutality and aggressiveness. But the God of the Old Testament, of the New Testament and of the Holy Qur'an is first a merciful, saving, forgiving God. All three religions had and must learn what God really teaches them. The God Jesus showed to His followers is first love, mercy, and forgiveness. Jesus comes to save the sinners, not those that regard themselves as already okay. Jesus' God is a loving father and Jesus promises that in the end God will win the day, and then all tears will be wiped off

our faces. What is striking in Islam is precisely religious tolerance. By the Prophet Muhammad, making a treaty of protection for the monks at the Sinai (whose monastery still stands), inviting Christian visitors to say Sunday mass at His mosque, but also the fact that Christian minorities could live and worship for 1400 years in Muslim lead countries of the Middle East.

Assmann has completely overlooked who this one God the three Abrahamic religions worship is. The intolerance and violence we see in monotheistic societies is not a consequence of the belief in one God, but it shows, in religious language, that people are sinner. The attitude the one God demands is not intolerance but respect for the conviction of the others. "Do not judge, so that yourself will not be judged" says Jesus and whoever calls another person god-less will be judged severely. It is God who in the end will lead everything into completion, completion in love.

RESPECT AND FRATERNITY

There still exist tensions, even hostility, between people of different religions. But slowly we are understanding that this is against the commands God gave us. For the Catholic Church, the decisive breakthrough happened, through the grace of God, at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). The Council made three statements of highest importance. First that every person has the God-given right to follow his or her

conscience (Dignitatis Humanae). Second that God offers salvation to every human being, even those that do not believe in God (Lumen Gentium, nr. 16). And thirdly, that Catholics should recognize what is "true and holy" in other religions, and specifically that Islam worships the one God (Nostra Aetate nr. 2 and 3).

Since the Second Vatican Council relations between the Catholic Church and other religions have continuously improved. In 1986 Pope John Paul II invited leaders of all big religions to pray for peace. Since then, every few years leaders of different religions come to Assisi to pray for peace. An extremely important happening was the letter with the title "A Common Word between Us and You" 138 important Muslims of most Muslim countries wrote in 2007 to leaders of the Christian religion, calling for peace and cooperation in promoting world peace. In 2008 Benedict XVI. was the first pope who prayed - silently - in the blue mosque of Istanbul.

Pope Francis continued this road. In 2019 he met Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar University, in Abu Dhabi where they issued the Abu Dhabi Declaration on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together. Francis and the Grand Imam are the first Christian and Muslim top leaders joined in personal friendship, convinced that Islam and Christianity must work together for world peace, stressing that religions should develop a culture of mutual respect. In his important Encyclical Fratelli Tutti (All Brothers)

"on **Fraternity** and Social Friendship" two years ago Francis writes that he got his inspiration from the Grand Imam, certainly the first time, that a pope writes that he got inspiration from a representative of another religion. Three times Francis quotes Ahmed el-Tayeb in Fratelli Tutti. And then, last year, Pope Francis visits Iraq where he went especially to Najaf to meet with Grand Ayatollah al-Histani, a meeting of crucial importance for building trust and unity between the different religious communities of Iraq, still suffering social fractures as consequence of a military intervention from the outside. When Pope Francis and Grand Ayatollah al-Histani embraced, it showed the direction into the future, how Christians and Muslims, or better, the religions of the world, should work together, in mutual respect, openness, determined to promote peace, letting religions be felt as graces by God, making people feel that God is The Merciful.

RELIGIONS AS GRACE

Dear friends, God has not given us the right to judge others whether their religious convictions are on the right track or not. Judgment is the exclusive right of God. Religions should become a grace for everybody, particularly for those outside. The existence of our religions in society should be an encouragement for everything that is positive. Religions should by their own way of behaving promote peace. Which also means that religions should not close themselves up but establish positive communications with members of the other

religions – as is already the case in Indonesia. Religions should be united in rejecting violence. No violence in the name of religions! We religious people should behave in a way that others will not be afraid of us. Religious practice that makes other afraid is a total subversion of what God wants from us. We religious people should create social environments where all religious communities, including those we might regard as sects or deviant, feel free to live and worship according to what their conscience teaches them.

A last word. We will only be able to project such a positive religious identity when we get rid of all arrogance. Genuine religion makes us humble. Thus, religious people should always be humble. Because they know how far they still are from what God expects from them, but also because they know, that humble people certainly will be saved.

Thank you for your attention.

