

ATTITUDES TO TOLERANCE – PRESBYTERIANS

Some notes for Knox Interfaith Network 4 June 2007 by Rowland

There is nothing in Christianity which leads to a significant element of violence or intolerance. Christianity shares with every religion the tendency to persecution when in the majority or able to manipulate a majority – as by Eastern Orthodox in Greece, Muslims in Saudi Arabia, Roman Catholics in Poland, Orthodox Jews in Israel, Communists in China.

However, Christianity in its core principles does not share an ethic of violence, as was the case in early Islam. In fact, it was persecuted by the state until toleration was granted by Constantine in 313 AD. Christianity reckons with a Divine Redeemer and the Holy Spirit, and the advance of God's kingdom through spiritual agencies, not by submission gained by physical means. Jesus rejected the use of the sword to bring people into the kingdom and stressed an ethic of personal tolerance and love of one's enemies not just one's friends.

However, Jesus did not reject the coercive power of the state to punish evil etc (e.g. Romans 13:1ff).

Once Christianity became tolerated and favoured by the state, the church tended to lose its spiritual character. With the collapse of Rome around 430, the Bishop of Rome was the most significant unifying figure in society, and gradually gained more power. Ultimately the church dominated society, and the concept of the Holy Roman Empire developed. Christianity was wounded in the house of its supposed friends by much of what was done in Christ's name. We have the Crusades - a political/religious campaign to recover the Holy Land earlier conquered by the Muslims. We have the Inquisition and other barbarisms.

As the church had added various teaching and practices which obscured the true nature of the Christian faith, the recovery of learning, and particularly access to Greek manuscripts of the New Testament brought to the West by those fleeing the fall of Constantinople by the Muslims about 1450 AD, meant increasing agitation for reform.

Ultimately the Reformation of the Western Church occurred from around 1517, and there was a Counter Reformation by the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent 1546-1563. All parties were still wedded to ideas about church and state which made true tolerance difficult. It was thought freedom of religion would destroy the cohesion of society and lead to chaos. There were various European Wars over this with most Protestant nations allowing a certain degree of toleration, although Roman Catholics had various disabilities into the 19th century. In Roman Catholic countries things were no better, and perhaps worse.

Scotland received the Reformation in 1560. Roman Catholicism was outlawed. It was held that church and state each aim at the good of citizens but with different means and with different official. Church and State must not interfere with each other, and the ruler is not the head of the church as he/she was/is in the Church of England. The Scots had many battles over this, including from around 1680-1690 (the killing times') because the King tried to enforce his religious policy.

In the 1830s the Government again tried to interfere in the spiritual affairs of the church particularly in the appointment of ministers. Ultimately this led to 40% of the 1100 or so ministers in the Church of Scotland withdrawing in 1843 to form the Free Church of Scotland. They gave up state provided, churches, manses and stipends for this principle.

Orthodox Presbyterians hold that Church and State are distinct and separate institutions; both are accountable to the Lord Jesus Christ who has received all authority in heaven and earth from the Father; the mutually helpful relationship between Church and State does not imply subordination of one to the other in its own sphere; and, in particular, the civil authorities have no jurisdiction or authoritative control in the spiritual affairs of Christ's Church. In maintaining these Scriptural principles, and the ideal of a united Christian Church in a Christian nation, the Church does not regard the involvement of the State in matters concerning religion as *ipso facto* contrary to liberty of conscience. Rather, she rejects intolerance or persecution as methods of advancing the kingdom of God, and recognises the individual's liberty of conscience and the right of private judgement.

This means that while Christian values should guide the nation's laws so far as basic morality is concerned – in which indeed most religions agree - other religions should be tolerated fully so long as under the guise of religion there is no denial of fundamental freedoms to others or fomenting of public disorder.

Those professedly of no religion of course really have fundamental values. The secular state reflects a certain view of the meaning of life and of values, and sometimes can be extremely fundamentalistic.

Christianity does not need anything but the opportunity of bringing its message of man's sin, and God's grace and salvation. It needs no unique privileges just fair play, for truth will make its own way. When it does not get fair play it usually also makes progress because Christ's followers not only know how to live well but how to die well.

Presbyterians are not the most numerous of Christians but have been widely influential in English speaking lands and also in the Netherlands etc.

State-aid for Roman Catholic and other private schools in Australia first became law under PM Robert Menzies, a man of Presbyterian background.