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How Final Is Finality? How Tolerable Is Tolerance?

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The tentative title was given to me, and was advertised in advance brochures, as "Finality and Toleration." I found that combination of terms enticing and accepted eagerly the opportunity to try to figure out what I think about it. I began to throw notes and clippings into a box marked "Finality," but it was not until early November that I had a block of time in which to sketch something out. I had two weeks during which I participated in a World Council of Churches consultation in Hong Kong on "Good News to the Poor." It was a good place and time in which to reflect on "The Finality of Christ." That issue was sharpened for me through conversations with people from six continents and over twenty countries, almost all of whom were Christian activists working directly with the poorest of the poor. At the same time, on the twenty hour flight going and returning and those niches of solitude which a person grabs at such meetings, I was plowing through Alasdair MacIntyre's amazing new work, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, 1988). The title for this piece is inspired by that title, and my own inclination to look at the problems in the use of the words "finality" and "toleration" is encouraged by MacIntyre's exhaustive demonstration that the words "justice" and "rationality" have been used in different ways by different people in different contexts.

Context is significant in the reading (and writing) of any text, not least on a topic as close to the bone marrow and nerve endings of reflective Christians as is that of "The Finality of Christ." I have decided to signal that context in the opening paragraph and to stress it with the breaking of an almost absolute personal rule by writing in the first person singular. If that is not enough to convince the reader that I am here speaking only for myself, I point to the section of *Word & World* in which this brief essay appears. This is one perspective on the theme.

At first glance it seems so unnecessary, and so misleading, to put to-

gether the words "finality" and "toleration." Does the combination mean that those who stress the finality of Christ must be, or usually are, intolerant people? Does it mean that those who do not stress that finality must be, or usually are, tolerant people? Does it mean that those tolerant folks who do not stress the finality of Christ ought to exercise their tolerance by tolerating those who do? The combination of "finality" and "toleration" is not a compound topic. We do not have here two parts of one thing. The combination rather suggests a conflict and raises a problem. That the problem is not a manufactured one is supported by a brief look at the historical fact that Christians in many places and many times have not only exhibited intolerance but have persecuted those with different religious beliefs or even divergent interpretations of Christianity. It is also the case that throughout Western history there are examples of Christians in a minority

position pleading for and praising religious toleration, and then failing to practice it themselves after arriving at a majority position. There have even been theological constructions (the thesis-antithesis doctrine) to justify this move. Since historically Christians have for the most part held tenaciously to some expression of the finality of Christ, and have also often exhibited a lack of toleration for those who have not, is it not obvious that there is an intrinsic and necessary conflict between finality and toleration?

If one attempts to think globally and to reflect broadly, some generalizations seem inescapable. Those great religions of the Far East which tend to be diffuse, to shun dogmatic formulations, and to look to a variety of sacred texts, also tend to be tolerant toward a wide variety of divergent religious views. Those great religions stemming from Abraham and the Middle East, which tend to be more gathered, to require dogmatic formulations, and to look to single authoritative sacred texts, tend to be less tolerant toward divergent religious views. Hinduism is a vast sea lapping at many shores, effortlessly bringing into its own depths elements from everything it touches. Gandhi admired Jesus and learned from the Sermon on the Mount. Although he said that some religions are more true than others, he held that all religions are true. There seems to be a direct connection with his commitment to non-violence. Buddhism and Shintoism manage to live comfortably together in Japan, each willing to dominate the caring for one of life's major passages. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the monotheistic religions, on the other hand, have usually been unwilling to compromise their hold on whatever it is that they have in hand. There is one God, Jehovah, and the Jews are the People of God. There is one God, one Lord, one baptism, and Jesus Christ is God's only Son. There is one God, Allah, and Mohammed is God's prophet. The history of Jews, Christians, and Muslims in contact with one another can be written as a history of conflict. Of course, that is painting with a very broad brush, and anyone with any knowledge of history can easily come forward with counter examples. The point is that these generalizations seem obvious and compelling, and it is not surprising that we are hearing from many quarters the plea not only for greater toleration on the part of Christians toward other religions, but calls for active participation in a common quest and a common spiritual life with those of religious traditions other than our own.

As a single instance of this current phenomenon, I suggest the name of Matthew Fox. Many church people who cannot name as many as five contemporary theologians do know the name of Matthew Fox. It was no surprise when I opened a recent issue of *The Lutheran* and saw across the top of the page the headline, "Fox: Faiths bound by common origins" (December 14, 1988, p. 27). Nor was it a surprise to read quotations from his address to 3,000 people in specialized ministries meeting at Central Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. Among other things, he is reported to have said:

> As we move to the level of creation itself, there is no Buddhist ocean, no Anglican river, no Methodist rain forest, no Jewish river, no Taoist desert....We are in this together, and it is all God's work. The Holy Spirit, the spirit of God touches us all....A return to the idea of a cosmic, mystical, universal Christ living in everyone is the only thing that can heal the rift between adults and youth....We have suppressed the mystical inside, the child inside. The divine wants to come out

today. We were all mystics once—that's why we hung upside down in trees.

It is not surprising, either, that he was given a standing ovation—even before he began to speak! It all sounds so wonderful. Or does it? What is he actually saying? What is "creation itself"? Is Fox suggesting that there is something purely objective and without interpretation out there, or back there? Does he think that if we avoid redemption talk and stick with creation talk, we can achieve a non-perspectival vision of reality? Is it his opinion that all the mentioned groups agree that whatever there is out there or back there should be named "creation" in order to make it clear that it was brought into being by a Creator? What are we to make of this facile equation of the Holy Spirit with what he calls (in this context) "the spirit of God"? How did the word "Christ" get in there? What does the word mean as he uses it? Would it make any difference if it were omitted? Since there is no Buddhist ocean and no Christian river, would it make any difference if the word "Buddha" were substituted in these sentences for the word "Christ"? Many contemporary theologians say it would not make a difference and that this is precisely the point, that our human story is a common story and that there is one God, no matter how that God is named.

The quotations above are consistent with the many writings of Matthew Fox. His material is appealing because it does sound so tolerant, and it is sprinkled with words familiar to Christians so that those who respond with enthusiasm can feel they are doing a Christian thing. But is such talk tolerable as an expression of Christian faith, confession, and witness? The Vatican says no. It is not preparing to burn him at the stake. It is convinced rather that the Roman Catholic Church ought not to consider tolerable the presentation of this talk as Christian talk. Uncomfortable as it is to agree with the Vatican on a negative judgment, I find myself doing so. If Matthew Fox were a solitary figure, it might be appropriate to relax and let it all go away. But he is one in a large and loud chorus of contemporary voices, and the stakes are very high. Does that make those who oppose such talk intolerant people? I think not.

To describe someone as intolerant is to point to that person as blameworthy. Used as an unqualified predicate adjective, the word carries only

and always negative connotations. To say, however, that a person cannot tolerate extreme heat is to make a morally neutral observation. And to say that a person absolutely refuses to tolerate sexually abusive language in his or her office is to make a praiseworthy comment about that person. To call such a person intolerant because he or she finds sexually abusive language intolerable would be to commit a serious language mistake. It often happens, of course. A genuine disagreement of moral judgment—for instance, whether a particular act should or should not be tolerated—is shifted to an accusation about moral character, and the matter is taken care of by declaring the person with whom one disagrees to be intolerant.

What happens with moral disagreements also happens with disagreement about what ought and ought not to be considered tolerable as an expression of Christian faith, confession, and witness. Genuine disagreements are shifted to personal accusations, not seldom to accusations about intolerance. Nothing gets accomplished in these situations until the disagreement is isolated from the accusation so that fruitful conversation can begin. There have been and are individuals whose particular moral flaws include intolerance. But the distribution of

that moral flaw in the human family has no demonstrable correlation with the distribution of positions people take on moral and theological issues, in spite of the obvious and very usual tendency to dismiss as intolerant those with whom one disagrees, along with the failure to detect that same flaw in one's self.

"The finality of Christ" is a phrase that Matthew Fox not only is disinclined to use but would find intolerable as an expression of what he considers to be the common human religious quest and experience. Rosemary Ruether goes further and calls such talk "christofascism." That does not make these people intolerant. It does indicate a radical disagreement about Christian faith, confession, and witness.

There are Christians who are first and primarily religious people, whose Christianity supplies them with symbols, metaphors, stories, shared experiences which bring to consciousness and to expression beliefs, convictions, feelings that they consider to be essentially common and universal. For these people Christianity is a way, one way, of being religious. To them, "the finality of Christ" tends to be an unhelpful, awkward, even embarrassing phrase.

There are other Christians who are first and primarily Christians, who mayor may not be religiously inclined, who consider Jesus of Nazareth to be the promised Christ and the focal point of all creation and of all history, who understand the Christian claim to be so content-specific that clear and concise confession is required of faith in order that witness might be clear and effective toward all people, religious or not, in the hope that all will join in the confession of Jesus as the Christ. For these people Christianity is a claim, which they believe to be true, about God and the world, about everything that has been and will be. Religious views and experiences are important and interesting, as is everything else in God's creation, but such views are understood in the light of the normative character of the Christian claim. For this second group, the content to which the phrase "the finality of Christ" points is not negotiable. For them, the burden of proof lies on

those who call themselves Christian but reject "the finality of Christ."

In recent Christian history, the most active concentration on the phrase was the period following the Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches in New Delhi (1961). A major study was launched there on "The Finality of Jesus Christ in the Age of Universal History" which gave rise to a study document on that theme (WCC Division of Studies, *Bulletin* VIII/2 [Autumn 1962]) plus a flood of books and articles. The universal history component signaled the importance of the new context for this ancient claim, and that context is taken by the study document with great seriousness. Also taken with great seriousness is the inseparability of the title "Christ" and the name "Jesus," and nowhere in this wide-ranging discussion is it suggested that the finality claim should be abandoned.

The reason is that to abandon the finality claim is to abandon that which is specifically Christian for the sake of that which is generally religious. The word "finality" has no single or simple meaning, but has served to gather up decisive notes of biblical witness to Jesus and the Christ. For instance, it can carry an eschatological meaning ("God has spoken to us in these last days through his Son, through whom he created the world" [Heb 1:2]). It points to theological-ontological claims ("And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" [John 1:14]). It reminds Christians of the soteriological focus of the name of Jesus ("There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name by which we must be saved" [Acts 4:12]). It

has a cosmological meaning ("In him all things hold together" [Col 1:17]). It has, I suppose one could say, an adverbial meaning. Complex though the process is, Christians who are interested primarily in being Christians have no choice but, *finally,* to go back through the witness handed down about Jesus in order to make decisions about how faith, confession, and witness should be formulated. (Paul does not rely on a Damascus Road experience, but claims to pass along those data about Jesus which he also received [1 Cor 15:3].) These are not proof texts. They are representative of the total witness of the Christian scriptures and of the Christian Church. For the Christian, everything focuses in Jesus Christ, and that's final.

What is at stake is everything the Church confesses as Christian. Is God triune, or is this universal Christian confession a metaphor used by Christians to talk about a god whose mystery and transcendence prohibit any confidence in the referential content of human language about god? Was Jesus raised from the dead? Is the risen Christ really present in the supper? Did something final ("once-for-all" [Heb 7:27; 9:12; 10:10]) happen on the cross? Do we look for the coming of the risen Christ, for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come? Does any of this matter? Or do only those things which Christianity has in common with other religions matter? Affirming the finality of Christ is a way of saying that the God whom Christians confess is Jesus-specific, and that it is finally the specificities rather than the generalities that matter—and matter absolutely. Thus to reject the finality of Christ is to make one's position intolerable as an expression of Christian faith, confession, and witness.

What about those poorest of the poor? Those who stress the finality of Christ also believe that no one anywhere should be excluded from the word

of witness and confession. Questions of culture and context, of how and when, are extremely important, but precisely in order to include rather than to exclude proclamation in that total embracing of the whole person to which Jesus Christ bids us.

Is there a history of Christians behaving with intolerance and even persecution toward those with divergent religious views? There is. But those who stress the finality of Christ see the appropriate response to that history not in the abandonment of the finality, or even in its modification, but in a more faithful and more disciplined confession of that finality and a more single-minded following of the Jesus to whom it points.

How final is finality? We have not even touched on the delicacies of *telos* and *eschatos.* But in the context of this piece, finality is absolutely final. It is not negotiable. How tolerable is tolerance? It is not only tolerable but admirable when it means civility, gentleness, humility, openness. It becomes intolerable when it is raised to an unqualified virtue and used to support automatic accusations of intolerance against those who make different judgments on matters of substance—specifically in this case about the heart of Christian faith, confession, and witness.

At least, that's one perspective on the theme.