PAN-CHIU LAI

RELIGIOUS CONVICTION AND TOLERANCE

Fragmentary Reflections on the History of Christianity

Introduction

Given the existing conflicts among religions at both national and international levels, there seems to be some sort of tension between religious conviction and tolerance. One might ask: Is it possible that one can be rooted in one's own faith conviction but at the same time practice tolerance towards others who have a different faith conviction that might not only be different from but even contradict one's own? What are the resources for a tolerance that is not based on a shallow compromise arising from an agnostic or relativistic attitude? Is religion entitled to act out conflicts because it is based on identity formation that is rooted in conflict? What are our spiritual resources for shaping a more harmonious future for humankind?[1]

Since different religions will have their own approaches to the issues concerning religious conviction and tolerance, it is quite impossible and irresponsible to address the issues from an abstract or "universal" perspective, talking about religion in general or all religions as a whole. To start the discussion with a particular religious tradition seems to be quite necessary. Among the world religions, Christianity is probably the most convenient as well as most challenging case to start with. It is convenient because Christianity is probably the most well-known religion in the Western world and has a very long and complicated history of dealing with issues concerning religious tolerance. It is challenging because there have been many precedent cases of religious intolerance in the history of Christianity. In recent years, due to the international con-

[1] An earlier draft of this paper was presented at "Religious Conviction and Tolerance: The Second Workshop of the First Ameranger Dispute," in Amerang, Germany, 1-3 July 2007. The questions raised here are based on the guidelines laid down by Prof. Michael von Brück, Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich, convenor of the event. The author would like to thank him as well as other participants for their comments. Grateful acknowledgement goes also to the Ernst Freiberger-Stiftung for financing the workshop and to the Education Ministry of the People's Republic of China for supporting the research work published here (Project No. 06JZD0004).

flicts related to countries associated with the Abrahamic monotheistic religions, i.e. Judaism, Christianity and Islam, many people have tended to assume that the religious conviction of monotheism leads inevitably to intolerance. In this article I would like to take up this challenge and consider the capacity or potentiality of Christianity for tolerance.

In the history of religious tolerance there have been two seemingly paradoxical or ironic cases in the West involving Christianity: the Roman Empire's persecution of Christians and the establishment of religious tolerance in the modern West with Christianity as the mainstream religion. The first case concerned the religious policy of the Roman Empire. Following Alexander the Great of Macedon, the Romans maintained freedom of religion for different ethnic groups and Roman society was often viewed as multireligious and multicultural society. Paradoxically, the Roman Empire had persecuted Christianity severely, even though their religious policy was thought to be tolerant or inclusive. The historian Edward Gibbon (1737–94) commented that ancient Roman civilization "was bound to reject Christianity just because Rome was tolerant" (quoted in Niebuhr 1951: 7; for details see Gibbon 1995). Yet the question remains: Why did the Roman Empire, which apparently promoted religious tolerance, attempt to suppress Christianity? Was it merely because of the exclusiveness of Christianity?

The second paradox pertains to the common perception of the exclusive nature of Christianity as a monotheistic religion. The philosopher David Hume stated that monotheism is relatively less tolerant of diversity than polytheism (Mullan 1998:7). If that is the case, then why and how were the institution, concept and practice of religious tolerance developed in the modern West, where Christianity was the mainstream religion? In view of that, what is the role of Christianity in cultivating religious tolerance in the modern West? If Christianity did support or even contribute to religious tolerance, how and why did its followers shift from adopting an exclusive attitude to adhering to the principles of religious tolerance?

Through an analysis of the two paradoxical cases in the history of tolerance in the Western world, this article argues that there is no irreconcilable contradiction between religious conviction and tolerance. With regard to a religion's attitude towards people of other religions, what is decisive is not whether this religion is polytheistic, monotheistic or even atheistic. It is possible for a devout Christian to accept and even to promote religious tolerance, even though the formation of Christian identity is rooted in conflict. In other words, Christianity has its own religious resources for supporting a tolerant attitude towards people of other religions.

Christianity and Religious Tolerance in the Roman Empire

The Roman persecution of Christianity has been studied extensively by a number of scholars. Due to the scope of this article, instead a comprehensive account of the historical facts, the following three observations will be highlighted. First, it was not only the Roman but also the Jewish communities that opposed Christianity (Stanton and Stroumsa 1998). This circumstance indicates that the Roman persecution of Christianity stemmed, to a certain extent, from the nature of Christian belief and identity, especially the cultural differences between Christianity and Judaism and the Roman Empire, rather than being the result simply of a conflict between monotheism and polytheism. Second, the early persecutions were sporadic and were instigated by popular hostility rather than by imperial authority. Not until about 250 CE were there state policies initiated by the empire to persecute Christians (Walker 1985: 50–53; 94–97). Over and above the differences in ideology and culture, the persecution was also a matter of power and politics. Third, while upholding monotheistic principles, Christianity initiated the quest for religious tolerance in times of persecution.

The first observation concerns the tension between the Jewish and Christian communities stemming from the attitude and teaching of Jesus. The Third Quest for the historical Jesus, which inspired controversy concerning the historical reliability of the gospels, highlighted Jesus' revolutionary attitude and critiques of the mainstream culture in Jewish society at that time (Borg 1984, 1987; Crossan 1991, 1994). According to some representatives of the Third Quest, in the first century, Palestine suffered from both foreign oppression by the Roman Empire and internal conflicts resulting from the system of domination that was perpetuated within Palestine. Distinguishing between clean and unclean, sacred and profane, Jew and Gentile, righteous and sinner, the whole of Jewish society was stratified by a politics of holiness. With the domination of the priests in Jerusalem, Galilee was, therefore, not only economically but also "culturally deprived."[2] As Marcus Borg has demonstrated, Jesus, as a radical critic of the dominating system, advocated a new understanding of human relationships unprecedented in any culture. Jesus proclaimed subversively that God had chosen the poor, the sick, women, sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, the possessed, and outcasts, despite the fact that he was mocked as Jesus from "Galilee of the Gentiles" (Borg 1987: 79–142). In short, Jesus' way of life and his message about the Kingdom of God was an alternative cultural movement that indicted and challenged the politics of holiness in the Jewish world. Furthermore, Borg points out, it was the cultural dynamic instead of the Jews and the Greeks who had killed Jesus. Accordingly, the question was not about who

[2] See Jenks 1993: 159–72 for an introduction to this concept.

killed Jesus but what killed Jesus. The answer lay in the dominant consciousness and conventional wisdom at that time. Jesus was not simply a victim of a movement "but one who provocatively challenged the ethos of his days. He was killed because he sought, in the name and power of the Spirit, the transformation of his own culture" (Borg 1987: 183). Thus, those participating in the execution of Jesus should not be called wicked; they may have killed Jesus, Borg suggests, simply for the sake of the well-being of society. One may conclude from Borg's study that, although Jesus also preached a monotheistic faith, his message was radical and subversive for the mainstream of Jewish culture at that time. His being persecuted was in this sense unavoidable.

Similar to Borg's perspective on the historical Jesus, Paul's understanding of the cross was also revolutionary, even though his words and deeds were less radical (Wong 2001: 243–63; 2002: 181–94). In Paul's letters, Christ was depicted as the Son of God who had humbled himself and had been obedient even to the point of death on the cross (Philipians 2:6–8). God chose sinners and the foolish in the world but rejected the wise (1 Corinthians 1:26–29). The salvation of Christ transcends class boundaries, for there is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free person, man or woman; rather, Christ is everything and is in everything (Colossians 3:11). This message was in sharp opposition to the rigid social stratification of the Roman Empire as well as the elitism of Greco-Roman culture. Advocating love and care for the weak and the poor constituted a challenge to the Roman emphasis on military power. The Christian belief in the cross and the Kingdom of God might imply a rejection of all kinds of manipulation and domination, as well as the sanctity and ultimacy of all political power. Yet the Gospel of Christ was not only a revolution against mainstream cultural values, for God brought down rulers from their thrones and lifted up the humble. It replaced manipulation, domination, hegemony and oppression with love, tolerance, self-sacrifice and forgiveness. Concisely put, the Christian message seemed to aim at changing the rules of the game instead of merely shifting the roles in the original game or reshuffling the players. The tension between Christianity and the empire's mainstream culture was evident because the Gospel of Jesus Christ was culturally radical and subversive, even though it was not a direct threat to political power.

The exclusion of the Christian faith by the Jewish community indicated that the Roman persecution of Christianity originated from neither the intolerance of the empire nor the basic Christian beliefs such as monotheism alone. With the doctrine of the Trinity, the monotheistic concept in Christianity was perhaps less strict in comparison with the absolute monotheism held by Judaism. However, the Roman Empire seemed to suppress Christianity even more severely. According to H. Richard Niebuhr, since the Jews were a distinct race with ancient traditions content to withdraw from socio-political life, they were not persecuted by the Romans, even though they were also monotheistic and

rejected the polytheistic culture of Rome (Niebuhr 1951: 7). In other words, the persecution of Christianity was not merely due to monotheistic belief; it was the faith and practice of Christians that confronted the Roman Empire's mainstream culture and ideology directly and extensively. The persecution clearly indicates that the religious tolerance or multiculturalism of the Roman Empire had its limits. Only those religions that were not regarded as a threat to political power were tolerated.

With regard to the second observation, during the formation of Christianity, the Roman Empire was a multiethnic and multireligious melting pot, where the ethnic minorities could practice their traditional religions legally. Since the followers of Jesus Christ were initially recognized as a small branch of Judaism (Acts 24:5), they could have been regarded as part of an "authorized religion" (*religio licita*). However, when Christianity spread outside Palestine and encompassed an increasing number of non-Jewish (or Gentile) believers, the followers began to identify themselves as Christians (Acts 11:26). When the number of Gentile believers exceeded that of the Jewish, Christianity began to be set apart from Judaism and to be considered a separate religion. Therefore, it could no longer enjoy the status of *religio licita* it had inherited from Judaism. However, as reflected in some of the correspondence between the emperor and officials (Stevenson 1987: 18–22), the early persecution of Christians was largely local and sporadic, with the Roman government being neither enthusiastic nor deeply involved.

It was not until 250 CE that the Roman Empire started to persecute Christians rigorously in an organized way from the top down. At that time, the number of Christians had already risen considerably, with members from diverse ethnic backgrounds, leading them to become a significant socio-cultural force rather than merely a tiny branch of a religion of an ethnic minority group. On the other hand, the Roman Empire was suffering from a decline of power as well as from foreign invasions. While homage to Caesar was required in order to maintain the pledge to allegiance, the Christians' refusal to bow down to Caesar was regarded as neglect of social unity or even treachery. In other words, during the peaceful and prosperous eras, the Roman Empire was not concerned about the existence of Christianity. It was during its decline, when the empire required absolute obedience or even the worship of the empire or the emperor as god, that Christianity became the target of persecution. With the aid of the term cultural hegemony coined by Antonio Gramsci (see Jenks 1993: 80–84), we can conclude that only those who did not constitute a threat to the cultural hegemony of the Roman Empire would be tolerated. As pointed out by H. Richard Niebuhr, Christianity was a threat to the cultural unity of the Roman Empire, "Christ and Christians threatened the unity of culture at both points with their radical monotheism, a faith in the one God that was very different from the pagan universalism which sought to unify many deities and many

cults under one earthly or heavenly monarch" (Niebuhr 1951: 8). In view of that, the conflicts between the nature of Christianity (the subversiveness of the cross) and the ideology and hegemony of the Roman Empire (or its "religiousness") were understandable and even inevitable. However, it is worth noting that when the Roman Empire ordered that all people worship its emperor and gods, it ceased to be religiously tolerant. It had become a religion that attempted to force all people to worship its gods. From then on, the relationship between Christianity and the Roman government was not purely an issue of church and state but also the persecution of one religion by another.

Our third observation concerns the Christian writers' attempts to defend Christianity. While a number of apologists wrote to defend the Christian faith against charges concerning atheism, adultery, cannibalism, etc., others wrote to the authorities to plead for justice and tolerance. For instance, Athenagoras (second century) pleaded with the emperor that Christians be judged fairly. Since religious tolerance was the underlying principle of Roman policy, he argued, Christians should not be punished merely because of the name but should be charged according to the crime actually committed (Athenagoras of Athens, *Legatio pro Christianis*, 1 and 2; cf. Richardson 1953: 300–03). Tertullian (ca.160–225) further claimed that religious freedom was a fundamental privilege:

> We are worshippers of one God.... You think that others, too, are gods, whom we know to be devils. However, it is a fundamental human right, a privilege of nature, that every man should worship according to his own convictions: one man's religion neither harms nor helps another man. It is assuredly no part of religion to compel religion—to which free will and not force should lead us—the sacrificial victims even being required of a willing mind. You will render no real service to your gods by compelling us to sacrifice, for they can have no desire of offerings from the unwilling, unless they are animated by a spirit of contention, which is a thing altogether un-divine. (Tertullian, *Ad scapulum*, 2; http://www. earlychristianwritings.com/text/tertullian05.html)

A similar concept of God is presented in the anonymous work *The Epistle to Diognetus* from the second or third century. Explaining how God sent his messenger to the world, it reads:

> He sent him out of kindness and gentleness, like a king sending his son who is himself a king. He sent him as God; he sent him as man to men. He willed to save man by persuasion, not by compulsion, for compulsion is not God's way of working. In sending him, God called men, but did not pursue them; he sent him in love, not in judgment. (*Epistula ad Diognetum* 7, 4–5; translation in Richardson 1953: 219)

The theological assertion that God does not want compulsory worship or forced belief became the key for Christians to advocate religious tolerance and to reject religious coercion, while maintaining monotheistic belief, even under persecution. This assertion was endorsed by Augustine and Luther as well as John Locke (1632–1704), a famous theorist of religious tolerance (Walzer 1983: 244).

The above discussion shows that whether Christians advocated religious tolerance was not directly and entirely dictated by monotheistic belief; more important was the power relationship involved. While Christianity was an oppressed minority, it was able to promote religious tolerance diligently. However, when it became the state religion endowed with political power, it could be very intolerant. Likewise, the polytheistic Roman Empire, in order to consolidate its own political power, could shift from encouraging religious tolerance and multiculturalism to becoming extremely intolerant at some points.

Christianity and Religious Tolerance in the Modern West

When considering the second paradoxical case concerning the complex relationship between Christianity and religious tolerance in the West, our discussion will focus on how the concept of religious tolerance in the West was formed in a largely Christian society and the way in which the role played by Christianity in the formation of religious tolerance was based on certain Christian beliefs.

Without a doubt, politics was a key factor in the development of religious tolerance. A number of studies on the history of Christianity have pointed out that religious tolerance in the Reformation period was often shaped by political considerations (Grell and Scribner 1996). As a sociopolitical system, the development of religious tolerance in the modern West was a long and complicated process. Perez Zagorin states that,

> Its gradual progress and realization in law and institutions were part of the evolution of most of western and central Europe and the Americas in the direction of political freedom, democracy and—in the widest, least doctrinaire sense—toward a liberal society protective of individual rights. (Zagorin 2003: 299–300)

In the twentieth century, religious tolerance continued to develop through the undermining of the confessional or denominational state, the recognition of religious pluralism and the separation of church and state (Zagorin 2003: 300). It is quite true that when the society became more and more pluralistic and none of the religions in society could realistically dominate other religion(s), they became increasingly tolerant. This seems to confirm Voltaire's view that "if you have two religions in your midst, they will cut each other's throats; if you have thirty, they live in peace" (Mullan 1998: 190). Moreover, it is worth noting that philosophers also played a significant part in facilitating religious tolerance behind the political scenes. In the Toleration Edict issued by France in 1787, we find that the reasons listed for supporting religious tolerance included the principles of natural rights, reason and humanity as well as the true spirit of Christianity. This means that, in addition to the theological bearings and religious traditions, the Edict was also inspired by the Enlightenment (Maclear 1995: 7–10). Thus, it is plausible to assume that the attempts of a number of rulers to promote toleration in their kingdoms were influenced by Enlightenment ideas advocating human rights and reason (Zagorin 2003: 291). In addi-

tion, the ultimate impact of the Enlightenment was the secularization and liberalization of Western society. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, secularization referred mainly to the decline of the authority of the Christian religion and churches over individual thinking and social life as well as the shift from the pursuit of Christian otherworldliness to worldly happiness. The realization of religious tolerance and freedom was, indeed, inseparable from those novel concepts. Secularizing the concept of religious tolerance, some Enlightenment thinkers maintained that the tolerance and freedom of religious conscience was a natural right held by the same tenure with all other rights of nature (Mullan 1998: 187–93). Although a number of them, including Voltaire, had expressed certain anti-Catholic or even anti-Semitic views (Zagorin 2003: 293), Enlightenment ideas paved the way for the success of religious tolerance.

Nevertheless, the efforts made by religious people must not be neglected. Since the sixteenth-century Reformation, a number of reformers had advocated different forms and degrees of religious tolerance, when Roman Catholicism resisted Protestantism. For instance, Martin Luther advocated the liberty of conscience, insisting that there should be freedom of religious faith and that no one could be forced to believe; the authority of government should be limited, for it could not access the spiritual realm (Luther 1989: 655–703). In 1530, a number of rulers in the Holy Roman Empire presented the Augsburg Confession to Emperor Charles V (1500–58), requesting permission to practice religion in their own territories in accordance with the creeds. This can be regarded as a quest for religious tolerance. However, the requested "tolerance" was confined to the protection of Lutheranism in certain regions legitimated by the Diet of Augsburg. The Calvinist and Anabaptist groups were not included. Calvinism or Presbyterianism upheld the concept of liberty of conscience on the one hand; on the other, they also believed that the degree of tolerance should be limited, while proposing that "all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed" (*The Westminster Confession of Faith* (1643), art. XX, XXIII; cf. Bettenson 1967: 247). Since most Anabaptists tended not to ally themselves with the government, they were unsupported by any government, and were often oppressed. Under such circumstances, the Anabaptists insisted on religious tolerance and freedom. For the development of religious tolerance and freedom, be it structural or conceptual, the contribution of the Anabaptists was indispensable. For example, the *Baptist Confession of Faith* (1646) stated that the liberty of conscience was to be supported and religious freedom was regarded as the most important freedom of all. A note added to *The First London Baptist Confession of Faith*, XLVIII reads:

> So it is the magistrate's duty to tender the liberty of men's consciences, Eccles. 8:8 (which is the tenderest thing unto all conscientious men, and most dear unto them, and without which all other liberties will not be worth the naming, much less enjoying) and to protect all under them from all wrong, injury, oppression and molestation; so it is our duty not to be wanting in nothing which is for their honor and comfort, and whatsoever

is for the wellbeing of the commonwealth wherein we live; it is our duty to do, and we believe it to be our express duty, especially in matters of religion, to be fully persuaded in our minds of the lawfulness of what we do, as knowing whatsoever is not of faith is sin. And as we cannot do anything contrary to our understandings and consciences, so neither can we forebear the doing of that which our understandings and consciences bind us to do. And if the magistrate should require us to do otherwise, we are to yield our persons in a passive way to their power, as the saints of old have done, James 5:4. And thrice happy shall he be, that shall lose his life for witnessing (though but for the least title) of the truth of the Lord Jesus Christ, 1 [Peter] 5; [Galatians] 5. (http://www.baptiststart.com/print/1646_london.html)

However, other than its positive insistence on religious tolerance through the upholding of the right of individuals to exercise private judgment, the European Reformation also contributed to the development of religious tolerance through questioning authority (Grell and Scribner 1996: 12).

In effect, it was the First Amendment of the American constitution that gave religious freedom (not just religious tolerance) legal status by stating that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." In addition to environmental factors such as the size of the nation, religious diversity and the absence of a dominant denomination, the establishment by the constitution of the separation of church and state and religious freedom was also influenced by cultural factors such as the mentality of secular humanists as well as the people coming to North America to seek their fortune. However, it has to be noted that also among those escaping religious persecution were the learned and talented, including the Non-Conformists in England, the Protestants who refused to join the Church of England for the sake of their beliefs, Roman Catholics from England, and Anabaptists from continental Europe. It was Roger Williams (1603–83), a member of the Calvinist and Baptist theological traditions, who founded Providence (today Rhode Island), the colonial settlement where religious tolerance and freedom originated (Maclear 1995: 50–51). Moreover, his work on religious tolerance entitled, *The Bloudy Tenet of Persecution, for Cause of Conscience* (1644) inspired John Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1685). Besides the Rhode Island Charter, documents such as the Maryland Toleration Act (1649) also showed that the policy of mutual religious forbearance was practiced in different parts of America, reinforcing the aspiration for tolerance and freedom in American culture (Maclear 1995: 45–47). The above examples show that, similar to the situation of early Christianity, the most tolerant were often those who had been persecuted yet maintained the hope of practicing their faith freely.

Analyzing its historical development, we find that the institutionalization of religious tolerance and freedom was shaped by both external forces (such as political and social circumstances) and internal factors (including the cultural and ideological contexts). Instances of the internal factors included the humanist

concept of liberty and the quest for truth, skepticism in the pursuit of truth, a non-dogmatic approach to Christianity, the belief that morality is not necessarily based on a particular religion, the debate on the nature and function of conscience. Without the theoretical backgrounds in philosophy and religion, there would have been no acceptance of religious differences among the intellectuals and the people. It is quite fair to say that religious ideas played a crucial part at the cultural and ideological levels. As Zagorin comments on sixteenth and seventeenth centuries:

> The idea of toleration was itself very largely inspired by religious values and was fundamentally religious in character ... their supreme concern was the welfare of religion itself. They acted from the primary conviction that persecution was contrary to the mind of Christ and a terrible evil which did great harm to Christianity. (Zagorin 2003: 289)

Chris Beneke also indicates that pluralism in America originated from the coexistence of different Christian denominations and the religious tolerance achieved afterwards. Thus, tolerance in America was not only a matter of the political system and the constitution; it was also a cultural foundation for pluralism (Beneke 2006: 289).Given the above, one may say that, although Christianity has been intolerant of other religions at times, the concept of religious tolerance is not necessarily contradictory to the basic beliefs of Christianity. Quite the contrary, it is clear that Christianity contributed positively to the institutionalization of religious tolerance.

Polytheism, Monotheism and Atheism

The above analysis of the two paradoxical cases demonstrates that even though the state religion of the Roman Empire was polytheistic, the scale of the persecution of Christians was no less than that of monotheistic Christianity towards other religions or other denominations, not to mention the religious persecution in modern atheistic totalitarian states. Therefore, polytheists, monotheists and atheists are all capable of being intolerant towards followers of other religions. Whether a religion is tolerant of others is not necessarily and directly determined by the number of its god(s)—one (monotheism), many (polytheism) or none (atheism). More relevant is whether the religion has power over others and how it uses that power.

Regarding the tolerance of religions in the Roman Empire, H. Richard Niebuhr commented that "Roman tolerance, like modern democratic tolerance, had its limits just because it was carried out as a social policy for the sake of maintaining unity. Whatever religion man followed, homage to Caesar was eventually required" (Niebuhr 1951: 8). Alternatively, we can say that a modern secular government's attitude towards different religions is neutral only in appearance. This is because the government also has its own values that may not be endorsed by all religions. Perhaps one may argue that "Caesar," as revealed in the persecution of Christianity, represented not only a political power but also a religious authority and, therefore, the tolerance of this power would be dif-

ferent from the neutral attitude supposed to be held by modern secular governments. However, it is worth noting that some modern totalitarian states, while upholding nationalistic ideas such as ascribing a sacred status to the state, encouraging the self-sacrifice of the individual to the state (comparable to religious followers sacrificing themselves for God), assuming the service of all religions to the political power, the deification of political leaders and the promotion of absolute obedience to the state instead of to God are actually exhibiting certain religious characteristics. Following Tillich's definition of religion as ultimate concern religiosity can be found, even among the atheistic communist regimes, and Nationalism is, in a sense, a quasi-religion (Tillich 1963: 14–18). Accordingly, totalitarian states can be seen as religions or quasi-religions, which may have negative effects on religious tolerance.

In the modern world, many believe that a liberal secular government that upholds the principle of the separation of church and state and a neutral attitude towards different religions could eventually resolve interreligious conflicts. Nevertheless, recent events in the USA seem to reveal the limitation of this approach to religious tolerance. Although the American constitution is based on the principle of the separation of church and state, and the American government always promotes America as culturally and religiously pluralistic with few incidents of interreligious violence, the cultural and political struggles are, in fact, escalating today. It has been argued that, at present, America is in a state of "cultural war," in which religion plays a central role. Some wonder whether the rise of religious rights will become a kind of Christian fascist oppression of non-believers (Hunter 1991).

This situation confirms John Kekes' assertion that, from the point of view of political philosophy, liberalism and pluralism are, in fact, incompatible. For pluralists, liberals actually presume certain values to be overriding and adopt the view that the government is not absolutely neutral (Kekes 1993: 200, 211). This is quite similar to the concept of multiculturalism. On the one hand, it proposes the equality of all cultures, recognizes cultural diversity and religious tolerance; on the other, one cannot deny that multiculturalism is in itself a value, an ideology (Watson 2000).

Furthermore, as Wendy Brown states, the conceit of tolerance within multicultural liberal democracies following the American model is not only a discourse of power but also a practice of governmentality. Under the apparent religious neutrality are secularism and bourgeois Protestant norms. The promulgation of toleration as such would simply rationalize the intolerance towards non-liberal states or transnational forces. Thus, the tolerance discourse becomes a universal value drawing a line between the civilized and the barbaric, instead of pertaining to a particular culture (Brown 2006: 7–8). In her own words,

> Put slightly differently, tolerance as a mode of late modern governmentality that iterates the normalcy of the powerful and the deviance of the marginal responds to, links, and tames both unruly domestic identities or affinities and non-liberal transnational forces that tacitly or explicitly challenge the universal standing of liberal precepts. Tolerance regulates the presence of the Other both inside and outside the liberal democratic nation-state, and often forms a circuit between them that legitimates the most illiberal actions of the state by means of a term consummately associated with liberalism. (Brown 2006: 8)

With respect to the theory in practice, Stephen V. Monsma and J. Christopher Soper offered a critique of the strict church-state separation model in the U.S. Confused and incoherent, the implementation of this separation, they argue, reflects the fact that the claimed neutrality has actually discriminated against the religious in favor of the non-religious secularist. Even worse, when religion is confined to the private sphere, the free exercise and expression of religion in public is restricted. This is illustrated by the substantial governmental aid provided to non-religious bodies for the development of education and social services, and the withdrawal of support for religious bodies as a demonstration of the principle of church-state separation. Consequently, the neutrality towards religious and non-religious bodies has been violated (Monsma and Soper 1997).

As shown by the above comments, it is evident that the presence of a democratic structure cannot ensure religious tolerance because the majority of the voters may not adopt a tolerant attitude towards religion, not to mention the leaders elected. As described by Michael Walzer, "Tolerance brings an end to persecution and fearfulness, but it is not a formula for social harmony" (Walzer 1997: 98). In other words, besides the incorporation of religious tolerance in a political system, cultural and ideological factors must also be taken into account in order to achieve social harmony.

According to Jay Newman, relativism is the source of moral weakness, indifference and skepticism. Ignoring the value of a truth claim, relativism tends to reduce religion to ethics. Therefore, it is inappropriate to identify relativism as the foundation of religious tolerance, even though, in practice, it may facilitate the cultivation of tolerance (Newman 1982: 21–23). For the academic study of religion, Newman believes that valid information about different religions is of vital importance. However, sometimes even an incomplete picture fosters religious tolerance. In the end, apart from legislation, education remains an important as well as effective way to promote religious tolerance; only through education can the natural tendency of intolerance be overcome (Newman 1982: 162–74).

Considering the limitation of relativism, Newman has aptly highlighted the importance of school education. However, Newman's expectation of the role of

education seems to be too optimistic. As shown in the American experience, it is doubtful whether school education alone can foster tolerance effectively. While there might not be any religious education in schools founded by non-religious bodies, in religious schools conversion might be upheld as the first or only goal of education. Neither of them is helpful in the cultivation of religious tolerance. Taking the New England Puritans as an example, it has been noted that religious conversion was the center of the whole education system with the transmission of the "experience of grace" to the next generation as the ultimate goal (Walzer 1983: 247). For public schools, the values and virtues of the state itself that they taught may be regarded as a manifestation of civil religion. Through this civil religion, American values were indoctrinated. Nevertheless, Americanism may be received by many, but not all. Some parents do prefer to send their children to denominational schools so as to avoid public schools and American civil religion (Walzer 1997: 76–80). It is rather clear that in order to foster religious tolerance effectively in the next generation, sole reliance on school education is not sufficient; religious bodies themselves should have an important role to play.

The Religious Conviction of Tolerance

Our brief historical survey seems to indicate that (1) different religions, including polytheistic, monotheistic and atheistic ones, are all capable of being tolerant or intolerant,[3] and (2) those religions that seem to be extremely intolerant may become supporters of religious tolerance.

With regard to (1), as someone from China, I would like to add that even China, which is proclaimed to be a harmonious religious environment where Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism can coexist peacefully together, is not entirely free of religious conflicts and intolerance. Some people have the impression that Chinese religions are tolerant of one another. This impression, however, is actually an idealized picture. A more realistic portrait is provided by W. E. Soothill, who points out,

> Toleration has been the prevailing attitude of Buddhism and Taoism towards Confucianism, even during their periods of ascendancy, but the Confucianists have ever been jealous of their rivals, and even persecuted them. Such persecution, however, has never attained to the severity exhibited in Europe, for its direction has rather been against temples and monastic establishments than against the persons of the occupants thereof. (Soothill 1929: 11)

[3] As Sarah Bullard noted in *Teaching Tolerance*: "Liberals and conservatives, evangelicals and atheists, whites, Latinos, Asians and blacks—all people on earth—are equally capable of tolerance and intolerance" (quoted in Brown 2006: 1).

Soothill's comment here, focusing on the relationship among the so-called three religions, namely Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism, does not mention in particular the role of Chinese government and the attached official religion in premodern China. In fact, religion played an important role in the legitimatization of the traditional Chinese government (Wang 2005). Soothill describes the official religion that sanctioned the state in this way: "Its centre was the worship of Shang Ti, the Ruler over all, the Supreme Being. Its circumference was the worship and control of demons. Between center and circumference were concentric circles of nature deities, sages, ancestors, and deified men" (Soothill 1929: 229). It is very clear that in premodern China, the state itself was also a religious institution with the emperor as its Chief Diviner, Chief Priest and Chief Shaman (Ching 1993: 43–46). Given the religious character of premodern Chinese government, as Anthony Yu points out,

> There has never been a period in China's historical past in which the government of the state, in imperial and post-imperial form, has pursued a neutral policy toward religion, let alone encouraged, in terms dear to American idealism, its "free exercise." The impetus to engage religion, on the part of the central government, is for the purpose of regulation, control and exploitation whenever it is deemed feasible and beneficial to the state.(Yu 2003: 3)

Yu's observation can be further substantiated by a recent survey of the historical documents concerning the state policy towards religions. It was found that, in the history of religions in China, aside from the government's suppression of Buddhism, which included forcing a number of monks and nuns to return to secular life, some minor religious sects were also suppressed by the government because they were suspected of engaging in political rebellion. Other than its oppression of Christianity, the state had also attempted to suppress Islam (Ren and Liang 2006). Similar to the Roman Empire, any persecution of religion launched by the premodern Chinese government can thus be considered a case of religion being persecuted by another religion or quasi-religion. In this sense, there are considerably more instances of religious intolerance in both ancient and modern China than one might have thought.

With regard to (2), the most critical issue is when people of different religions uphold the respective truthfulness and superiority of their religions, whether they can establish the foundation of religious tolerance from their own traditions.

Interestingly, as stated by Voltaire (1694–1778), a critic of Christianity, "of all religions the Christian is undoubtedly that which should instill the greatest toleration, although so far Christians have been the most intolerant of men" (Voltaire 1983; quoted in Zagorin 2003: 3; see also Mullan 1998: 190). Voltaire's statement, which may have aimed at criticizing the Christian churches at that time, implies that even though Christianity was not very tolerant at that

time, it had the potential to be very tolerant because it had its own historical resources to support a tolerant attitude.

From the history of the establishment of religious tolerance in the modern West, we have found that some of those who suffered religious persecution refused to oppress others when they had the power to do so at a later stage. They cherished religious freedom and hoped that others would be free from religious persecution. Instead of succumbing to the vicious cycle of revenge, they advocated the idea of religious tolerance, put it into practice and even institutionalized it. From the point of view of Christian ethics, this corresponds not only to the teachings of "love your enemies" in the New Testament (Matthew 5:38–48), but also to the saying, "And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt" in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 24:10–19). In other words, the experience of being persecuted and the identity formed in conflict can be transformed into the ethical foundation of tolerance and kindness to aliens (Deuteronomy 24: 17–22).

Considering the situation that contemporary people are all strangers to one another, Julia Kristeva modified the saying, "Do not oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" into "Do not oppress the stranger, for we are all strangers in this very land." She expects that it is easier for us to tolerate others if we acknowledge the other in ourselves or admitted that we were all strangers (Kristeva 1993, 21; also 1991). It is interesting to note that Christians, in addition to their experiences of being persecuted, did have the experience of being strangers in their homeland. Since the early history of Christianity, Christians have been regarded as a separate or third ethnic group other than the Jews and the Romans. *The Epistle to Diognetus* (2nd or 3rd century) described Christians as follows: "They live in their own countries, but only as aliens. They have a share in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land" (*Epistula ad Diognetum* 5, 5). This implies that Jewish Christians were seen as aliens by their fellow Jews in their homeland. In other words, due to the early Christians' strong identity experience of being strangers in their homelands, it is part of the Christian tradition to be able to adopt a tolerant attitude towards others.

One of the possible reasons for some Christians not converting their experience as strangers and the oppressed into oppression but, instead, promoting religious tolerance was that they hoped to prevent others from suffering the same oppression. Positively speaking, they had experienced religious freedom themselves and wished to see others enjoying the same kind of religious freedom as well. In the same year that the United Nations adopted the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), the World Council of Churches issued the *Declaration on Religious Liberty*, proclaiming that every Christian must recog-

nize the religious freedom of others as they recognized that of theirs. An ethical principle underlying this declaration would seem to be stated in the New Testament, "Always treat others as you would like them to treat you" (Matthew 7:12). Perhaps one may put it in a Confucian way, namely: Do not do unto others what you would not like others to do unto you." For Christians, to forgive, to show mercy to others and to love one's enemies are the virtues based on the Christian narrative or experience concerning the Cross of Jesus Christ, rather than some general ethical principles imposed on Christianity. According to Paul Tillich's interpretation, the cross of Christianity represents the Protestant principle of self-negation, an ability to resist self-idolization and self-absolutization (Lai 1994: 90–96). Jürgen Moltmann even understands the theology of the cross as a critique of power (Moltmann 1974). These are merely some of the examples indicating how modern Christian theologians can offer theological interpretations of the cross that will contribute to a more tolerant attitude towards other religions. In other words, Christianity should have its own spiritual resources to cultivate a tolerant attitude towards people of other religions. Its identity formed in conflict can be beneficial and not necessarily detrimental to religious tolerance.

Concluding Remarks

As demonstrated in our case study of Christianity, it is clear that the approach of cultivating religious tolerance within a religious tradition is not unrealistic but historically significant. Different religions might have their own resources to cultivate a tolerant attitude towards other religions. They might have their own experience of being persecuted as well as the spiritual strength to transform their experience of being persecuted into positive ethics of tolerance towards people of other religions. Thus, further research to explore whether different religions can learn from each other in cultivating a tolerant, respectful and even cooperative attitude towards each other is needed.

LITERATURE

Beneke, Chris. (2006). *Beyond Toleration: The Religious Origins of American Pluralism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bettenson, Henry (ed.). (1967). *Documents of the Christian Church.* 2nd ed. London: Oxford University Press.

Borg, Marcus J. (1984). *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus.* New York: Mellen.

(1987). *Jesus: A New Vision.* New York: Harper Collins.

Brown, Wendy. (2006). *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ching, Julia. (1993). *Chinese Religions.* London: Macmillan.

Crossan, John Dominic. (1991). *The Historical Jesus.* Edinburgh: T & T Clark.

(1994). *Jesus: a Revolutionary Biography.* San Francisco: Harper.

Gibbon, Edward. (1995). *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. New York: Modern Library.

Grell, Ole Peter and Bob Scribner(eds.). (1996). *Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Reformation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hunter, James Davison. (1991). *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America.* New York: Basic Books.

Jenks, Chris. (1993). *Culture.* London and New York: Routledge.

Kekes, John. (1993). *The Morality of Pluralism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kristeva, Julia. (1991). *Strangers to Ourselves.* Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

(1993). *Nations without Nationalism.* Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lai, Pan-chiu. (1994). *Towards a Trinitarian Theology of Religions: A Study of Paul Tillich's Thought.* Kampen: Kok Pharos.

Locke, John. (1983). *A Letter Concerning Toleration.* Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co.

Luther, Martin. (1989). "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should be Obeyed (1523)." In: Timothy F. Lull (ed.). *Martin Luther's Martin: Basic Theological Writings*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Maclear, J. F. (ed.). (1995). *Church and State in the Modern Age: A Documentary History.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Moltmann, J. (1974). *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*. Transl. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden. London: SCM.

Monsma, Stephen V. and J. Christopher Soper. (1997). *The Challenge of Pluralism: Church and State in Five Democracies.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Mullan, David George. (1998). *Religious Pluralism in the West: An Anthology.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Newman, Jay. (1982). *Foundations of Religious Tolerance.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Niebuhr, H. Richard. (1951). *Christ and Culture.* New York: Harper.

Ren Jie and Liang Ling. (2006). *Zhongguo de Zongjiao Zhengce* [China's Policy On Religion: From Ancient to Contemporary]. Beijing: Min zu chubanshe.

Richardson, Cyril (transl. and ed.). (1953). *Early Christian Fathers*. The Library of Christian Classics, Vol.1. London: SCM.

Soothill, W. E. (1929). *The Three Religions of China.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stanton, Graham N. and Stroumsa, Guy G.. (eds.). (1998). *Tolerance and Intolerance in Early Judaism and Christianity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stevenson, J. (ed.). (1987) *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*. Revised with additional documents by W. H. C. Frend. London: SPCK.

Tillich, Paul. (1963). *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions.* New York/ London: Columbia University Press.

Voltaire. (1983). "Tolérance: Tolerance." In: Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*. Ed. Theodore Besterman. Harmondsworth: Penguin. 1st French ed. 1764.

Walker, Williston. (1985). *A History of the Christian Church.* New York: Scribner.

Walzer, Michael. (1983). *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality.* Oxford: Blackwell.

(1997). *On Tolerance*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press.

Wang, Shunda. (2005). Shen sheng zheng zhi: Zhongguo chuan tong zheng zhi de xing cheng (*Holy Politics: The Formation of Traditional Chinese Politics*). Beijing: Zhongguo wen shi chubanshe.

Watson, Conrad William. (2000). *Multiculturalism.* Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.

Wong, K. C. Eric. (2001). "The De-radicalization of Jesus' Ethical Sayings in Romans." *Novum Testamentum* 43.3: 243–63.

(2002). "The De-radicalization of Jesus' Ethical Sayings in 1 Corinthians." *New Testament Studies* 48: 181–94.

Yu, Anthony C. (2003). "On State and Religion in China." *Religion East & West* 3: 1–20.

Zagorin, Perez. (2003). *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West.* Princeton/ Oxford: Princeton University Press.