



Georgiy Chistyakov

# FAITH AND TOLERANCE<sup>1</sup>

The ancient Greeks did not face the problem of bigotry and, respectively, religious tolerance. For Greeks, strongly contrasting themselves with 'savages' in terms of language and culture, in a very simple and natural way, included in their pantheon the gods of neighbouring folks and various oriental cults. Already back in the V century A.D. they easily identified the Egyptian god Amon with their Zeus, Thoth with Hermes, etc. The Romans went down the same road. In Rome people did not split into friends and foes, however, Roman citizens did enjoy significantly more rights than those devoid of Roman citizenship.

At the same time a person of any national background could be a Roman citizen. Let us recall that apostle Paul was a pure Jew, “being circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews” (Plp 3:5). Besides, the Romans as well as the Greeks gladly included in their sainthood the gods of conquered peoples or simply identified the new gods with their own ones. For this reason there was no place for fanaticism and bigotry during the times of the Classical era.

Neither Greek nor Romans had a scripture and therefore a religious norm, which appears in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Christians were persecuted by Rome because they did not accept the common (social!) values of the state and society (religious convictions had nothing to do with that). One must suppose that bigotry is always connected with isolationism — geographical, political and religious. It sparks in those societies that have an isolated lifestyle and, on top of that, consider their religion to be the only genuine one. Bigotry and consequently religious intolerance may develop only if truth is interpreted in terms of being *open to me or to us*, bestowed to *my nation*, etc. If we employ Erich Fromm’s terminology — when a religion is practiced not based on the principle “to be,” but “to possess.”

Truth as our property, as *chiesa militante* (“Church militant”), armed truth — not condemned to death on the Cross, but condemning to death Jan Hus or Giordano Bruno. Truth that belongs to the crowd, thirsty for blood - this is where bigotry begins. The crowd that we see in the Gospels — demanding the death (or even more openly: the blood) of Jesus — is probably one of the first manifestations of bigotry in history. The depths of this crowd give rise to a sense of the exclusiveness of one’s culture, religion, ideas, which are preached in the book *The Myth of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* by Alfred Rosenberg.

Medieval Europe was vanquished by isolationism. The main theme of the ‘Song of Roland’ is the war against the infidel. Even Marco Polo, who in the second half of the XIII century visited all Eastern countries, including China, remains largely silent on the religious practices of the countries he travelled to. Just once he comments on the religion in China: “There are a lot of demon

powers behind those idols; we shall not speculate on that in this book; it does not even behove the Christians to hear that” (*Polo Marco A Book about the Diversity of the World*. St.Petersburg: Amfora, 1999. Chapter 161, p. 255). Unlike Marco Polo, his contemporary Dante Alighieri does not contradicting Christians and representatives of other religions. In the XIX Canto of his *Paradiso* Dante writes:

‘A man  
Is born on Indus’ banks, and none is there  
Who speaks of Christ, nor who doth read nor  
write;  
And all his inclinations and his acts,  
As far as human reason sees, are good;  
And he offendeth not in word or deed:  
But unbaptized he dies, and void of faith.  
Where is the justice that condemns him?  
where  
His blame, if he believeth not?’

This is an entirely different approach to the problem of a foreign faith. *Ov’è la colpa sua, se ei non crede?* (“where his blame, if he believeth not?”) — exclaims Dante thereafter bewildered by his own boldness. He is bewildered, but he still decides to keep these lines in the final text of his *Comedy*. In his other work — the treatise *Monarchia* — for the first time in history Dante introduces the notion of *omne genus humanum* or *universitas humana*, i.e. humanity. Unlike his predecessors and contemporaries he sees humanity as one whole. This is a huge step towards understating that ‘another’ is not in any way worse than ‘I’. For the first time since Jesus someone raised this question in definite terms. Isolationism gives way to universalism. Dante approaches it precisely as a mystic, as a Franciscan of the third order and poet-Godseer, quite close to the spiritual practices of Medieval Catholicism, and primarily, to the mysticism of light.

From this point, though the XVI century is still ahead with its religious wars, Inquisition and auto-da-fé, Bartholomew’s Night, slaughters of Old Believers in Russia and much more, the idea of religious tolerance becomes relevant. Only in XVIII will Voltaire confront mankind with this question again. “Jesus,” writes Voltaire, “was neither superstitious, nor intolerant; He was in touch with

<sup>1</sup> Paper from the Conference “Tolerance: Joining Efforts”. Moscow, The Andrei Sakharov Museum and Public Centre, April 4-5, 2002.

the Samaritans; He did not say a word against the religious cult of the Romans, from all directions oppressing His motherland. Let us come up to His tolerance and by doing so earn tolerance towards ourselves.”

Voltaire comes back to this issue in the *Philosophic Dictionary* in the entry ‘Religion’. Here he presents the reader with an imaginary dialogue with Jesus. “Shall I take the part of the Greek or the Latin Church?” asks Voltaire. “I have never made any difference between a Jew and a Samaritan,” replies Jesus. Then Voltaire exclaims: “I am choosing You to be my only Teacher.” One should keep in mind that Voltaire’s anticlericalism was deeply Christian and far from being atheistic.

Voltaire clearly understood that tolerance within the religious realm may and will be understood as nothing else but indifference towards all religious matters. For this reason he remarks: “Do not say that as long as we are preachers of tolerance, we preach indifference. No, brethren: the one, who worships God and does good to people, is far from being indifferent. This epithet is more suitable to define a superstitious man, who counts on God’s mercy repeating odd formulas, whereas in fact he is quite indifferent to the fate of his neighbour, and even lets him die without lending him a helping hand.” More than two hundred years of our history since the time of Voltaire, the situation has not changed much.

Religious tolerance begins at the point when a certain religion stops being an ideology, which demands that a person becomes a member of various organizations, goes on protests, etc, and, figuratively speaking, stipulates that a person must yell at the top of their voice “crucify him” — and instead becomes something deeply personal: justified in the depths of one’s ‘ego’ only by confession, by the divine encounter described by the Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh. And again we recall Erich Fromm’s “to possess” and “to be.” “Faith based on the principle of possession,” says Fromm, “gives confidence; it claims the assertion of unconditional irrefutable knowledge.” “It,” continues Fromm, “relieves a human being from a heavy duty of independent thinking and decision-making.” This kind of faith leaves no hope for tolerance within the religious realm.

But there is also a different kind of faith based on the principle “to be”; it is “first of all, not a belief in certain ideas, though this may also be

the case, but rather an inner commitment, a *tenet* of a person. It would be more accurate to say that a person *believes* than a person *has faith*,” says Erich Fromm in this respect. This idea turns out to be unexpectedly close to the Gospel of John, where the verb “to believe” is mentioned more than 70 times and the noun “faith” hardly even once. Faith based on the principle “to be” is always dynamic. A man feels it anew every moment of his life — time and again standing like Moses in front of the Burning Bush that does not get consumed by flames — as something deeply personal, and therefore, unique. However, knowing that one’s faith is unique does not rule out the fact that some other people’s faith may in a way be unique as well. Hence, one may conclude that the truth in religion is *unconditional* (in any other case it would not be faith, but rather some rational compromise with other people’s religion), but not *exclusive*. This is the paradox we have to comprehend and come to terms with.

Faith based on the principle “to possess” is a ‘one and for all’ established doctrine that one must strictly follow no matter what. Faith based on the principle of being is always mystical and, therefore, always open to the personal faith of another person; it is constantly searching; it is always associated with new revelations and the live experience of faith for every believer. Obviously, in the conditions of real life it is impossible to point out a group of believers and claim that their faith is based on the principle of being, and then detect another group and say that they believe in the principle of possession. Certainly, in reality both principles are mixed together inside each of us. Thus, we can only speak of a predominance of one of these faith principles inside us.

If we go beyond Fromm’s vocabulary, we may suggest that the two faith principles theory had been developed long before Fromm by H. Bergson in his *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. Bergson speculates on two types of belief in God: static and dynamic. The static religion is dominated by magic, ritual and doctrine. The dynamic one has at its disposal only mysticism and love, which results from the mysticism. A mystic feels that “the truth,” writes Bergson, “flows from its spring inside him as a vivid force. And he already cannot help but share this force like the sun cannot stop shining. But the vehicle of this force is not limited to sheer words. For the love that consumes him





is not the love of one individual to God, but the love of God for *all* (*italics G. C.*) people. Through God and with God's help he loves the *entire* (!) mankind with this divine love."

Precisely this kind of mysticism is revealed in *The Way of a Pilgrim*, in the works of Father Sofroniy Sakharov and Metropolitan Anthony's sermons, in the book *On the Mountains of Caucasus* by the schemonk Ilarion, as well as in the practical activities of many priests in Russia, among which the author wishes to distinguish the well-known to him Archimandrite Tavrion, F. Vladimir Smirnov and the 'sunny' Archimandrite Sergey (Saveliev).

However, religion as a social phenomenon — religion accessible to an average believer — according to Bergson is "the crystallization achieved by means of scientific cooling of the substance that flaming mysticism had poured into the soul of the mankind." In other words, religion as a social phenomenon is normally a static form of the mystical dynamism.

Institutional religion is always rather static. In Russia this stasis is much more noticeable than anywhere Europe or in the US. This may be explained only by the fact that (as we stated earlier) the majority of believers in modern Russia have turned to religion not more than 7-8 years ago. Already in the '30s Mother Maria (Skobtsova) pointed out the dangers of transition from atheism to faith in Russia. In the paper 'The Present and Future of the Church', which she presented at the monastic gathering in Paris in March 1936, she raised the question of the church's fate after the political powers of Russia set the country free.

"New kinds of people," said Mother Maria, "raised by the Soviet regime will come to this church (...) What does it mean? (...) At first, these overly greedy and perceptive listeners will study various convictions (...) and at some point, when they start realizing themselves as part of the

Christian congregation, (...) they will say: there are several viewpoints on this matter — which one of them is true? There cannot be several truths at a time. And as long as this opinion is the genuine one, others are subject to extermination as the false ones."

She continued: "If within the viscous and ambiguous Marxist worldview they are consumed by heresy-mania and exterminate antagonists, then by the time they become Christian followers, they will turn into even more zealous heresy eradicators and orthodoxy advocates." Here we need to note that, in fact, Mother Maria's words apply not only to Orthodoxy, but to all denominations and religions on the territory of the former USSR. *Bellum omnium contra omnes*, "War of all against all" — this is the current state of affairs in Russia, certainly, not on the level of hierarchy, which is dominated by peaceful and civilized relations, but on the level of the average active church-goers or would-be and pseudo-ecclesiastic editions. "Hyperbolizing," says Mother Maria, "one may suggest that for the wrong way of crossing oneself they will fine people and for refusing to go to confession, send to Solovki in exile".

Russia is facing exactly this problem today. The actions of the so-called Orthodox brotherhoods as well as their websites demonstrate such extents of aggression and intolerance that one look at them is enough to lose one's mind. "There are grounds for desperation (...), if one does not believe that the genuine Christian truth always implies freedom." Russia is making a very slow and extremely difficult move towards this freedom, which involves a lot of mistakes and failures. And we should hope that there is a future ahead of us based on tolerance and trustful relations between very different people, belonging to diverse denominations and religions, to various social groups and nations, to different languages and cultures. ■