

MONOTHEISM AND INTOLERANCE

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The phrase *Uno itinere non potest perveniri ad tam grande secretum* “Not by one avenue only can we arrive at so tremendous a secret”, which we have chosen to illustrate the subject of this *4th Conference of the European Association, 6th of the Spanish Society of the Sciences of Religions* (“Tolerance and Intolerance among Religions”) takes us back to the final period of the Roman Empire, a time when two religious systems, and even the two different societies, the Graeco-Roman and the Christian, competed with one another, one to stay alive, the other to impose its hegemony and dominance. The sentence we reproduce is taken from the famous dispute known as “the affair of the altar of Victory” in 382, which was contested between Symmachus on one side and bishops Ambrosius of Milan and Damasus of Rome on the other. Symmachus was an illustrious Roman senator who defended the principle of religious tolerance, which he considered part and parcel of Roman religion, against the leaders of the church, who were safe in their positions for the moment thanks to the support they gave to the Christian emperors. The desperate cry of Symmachus *Uno itinere non potest perveniri ad tam grande secretum* fell on deaf ears. Ambrosius’s criterion prevailed: “There can be no salvation other than the worship of the one true God, who is the God of the Christians... Therefore, whoever defends (*milita*) this true God must not decountenance or avail himself of tolerance and indulgence (*non dissimulationem, no conniventiam*), rather only zeal for the faith and the religion”. The consequences that the triumph of Ambrosius’s thesis have had on western history are well known.

It is easy for the historian to answer the question of why Ambrosius’s ideas triumphed, evidently because they were entirely supported by the political power. What is more difficult to explain is why this debate arose at the end of the Ancient World. Immediately, the problem of Christian monotheism against Graeco-Roman polytheism is brought to mind. Without attempting to provide an answer, I prefer to ask questions like those posed by the now forgotten Erik Peterson in his famous essay “Monotheism as a

political problem”, now accessible to Spanish readers thanks to a recent translation. In specific or tacit form, questions arise such as: “Do religious beliefs have any effect on the political system? With what legitimacy? What differentiates the political reception of Polytheism and that of Monotheism? Does the Christian belief in the Trinity introduce any difference in the sphere of its political reception that distinguishes Christian Monotheism from those of Judaism or Islam? What is the dogmatically exact relationship between Christianity and the political sphere? By virtue of what theological reasons?”. Peterson opened up these matters to provide an answer to the problems created by national socialism and the appearance of the *Reichstheologie* in Germany. Doubtless his questions would have been extended to Jewish and Islamic Monotheism nowadays. Contemplating the panorama offered by the world today, the reproof Peterson makes to the political theology of Eusebius of Caesarea in the fourth century takes on much greater significance. Eusebius, by establishing a close relationship between the Gospels and the Pax Romana, saw the prophecy of Psalm 45, 10, *Auferens bella usque ad finem terrae* (“making wars to cease even to the end of the earth”) fulfilled under the emperor Constantine. Augustine of Hippo was more prudent when, taking a look at his surroundings a century later, said: “This has not yet been fulfilled; there are still wars; between nations in order to rule; between sects; among Jews, pagans, Christians, heretics; there are wars and they become more frequent,... some fighting for the truth and others for falsehood. *Making wars to cease even to the end of the earth* has not yet been fulfilled, but perhaps will be”. The “perhaps will be” still has not come to pass.

The matter of Tolerance and Intolerance among religions has produced tons of printed text, but it is a matter of enormous relevance in our times, above all after the 11th of September in New York and the 11th of March in Madrid, if we look further, to the Balkans, to Palestine and Israel, to Iraq or Afghanistan, to Nigeria, to the Sudan, etc. But it was not a classic subject for ideological debate in western thinking until it was posed by the men of the Enlightenment, who put down markers in studies such as those of Locke *De Tolerantia* in 1677, “Treatise on Tolerance” by Voltaire in 1763 or Lessing’s “Nathan the Wise” in 1778. And it was the Prussian philosopher-king Frederick II (1740-1768) who became the first politician to make it his own, inspired by Voltaire, by laying down the principle that “all religions are tolerated and it is only necessary to take care that one does

not injure another, since each has a right to be holy in his own way". A century before, in 1651, Thomas Gage affirmed : *Odia religionum sunt acerbissima*.

1400 years had had to pass for Symmachus's proclamation to be posed once more. During this time, experiences of religious tolerance were few and short-lived. In our country it has become fashionable in recent years to highlight the co-existence of the so-called "Spain of the Three Cultures" or "of the Three Religions", Christianity, Judaism and Islam, in the Middle Ages. But rather than a model of tolerance, it was an experience of co-existence. It is the same co-existence that was produced in Nathan of Saladin's Court and if we wish to call it tolerance it must be understood as the co-existence of some communities who both saw themselves as separate and wanted to be so, who were aware that this co-existence could lead to conflict, but who entrusted its resolution to normal pragmatism in daily life. Perhaps the religious atmosphere of Medieval Spain in which Christians, Jews and Muslims lived together was far better reflected by a contemporary, the 'Infante' Don Juan Manuel, when he stated that "war is made with the moors for land, and not for religion". This comment acquires its full value if it is taken into account that the 'Infante' was a nephew of Alfonso X and a grandson of Fernando III, known as "the Saint", the Christian king who conquered Cordoba and Seville, among other cities, from the Arabs. The thinking of the 'Infante' reflected a rationalist mentality that precluded the Renaissance whereas his grandfather Fernando III was a man of the Middle Ages. Some Spanish historians have presented the saint and conqueror king as a representative of the Spain of the Three Cultures due to the fact that the diverse epitaphs decorating his tomb in the cathedral of Seville are written in hebrew, arabic, latin and castillian. But the text has a particularity that drew the attention of Américo Castro. While the arabic, hebrew and castillian texts say that the king "crushed and destroyed all his enemies", the latin text is much more radical: *contrivit et exterminavit penitus hostium suorum proterviam*. Who were these enemies of king Fernando? First and foremost the Muslims, from whom he conquered numerous cities and territories, but there is something else in the latin text. The expressions *contrivit*, *exterminavit* allude to an extreme violence and the term *protervia* (shamelessness, effrontery), very much the language of the clerics and theologians of the Middle Ages, expresses evil as something inherent in certain persons; it is comparable with *pravitas*, of heretics and renegades of the faith as it appears in the definition of the Holy Office:

Officium Sanctae Inquisitionis adversus haereticam pravitatem. The verb *exterminavit* is thus understood better, as a synonym of *extirpare*, which belongs to the language of the Inquisition.

But intolerance has not been an exclusively Christian phenomenon. Could it be an inheritance of all three monotheist and revealed religions? Some modern theologians try to show that the ideas of religious tolerance and liberty, which the Catholic Church failed to recognise until the Second Vatican Council, are not from the Enlightenment and Liberalism, but had been defended by many Christian authors from the Middle Ages onwards. The names of Abelard, Marsiglio de Padua, William Occam, Nicolás de Cusa, Marsiglio Ficino, Thomas More, Erasmus of Rotterdam, Bartolomé de las Casas, Giordano Bruno, Roger Bacon, Hugo Grocio, etc. are cited. But what is forgotten is that almost all these thinkers were suspects or were condemned for heresy. Some arguments of the modern theology of salvation sound of apology and the apologetic has never been characterised by its objectivity. It might be remembered that laicism, nowadays questioned once more and anathematised by many leaders of the Catholic Church, is, according to the philosopher Reyes Mate, “the making concrete the secularisation of the universal Christian spirit”. History shows that in theocratic and absolutist cultures it is nearly impossible for the majority not to incur all kinds of intolerance, and that the defence of orthodoxy as a sign of identity has often been a factor of intolerance against error or heresy. The revealed religions have adduced eternal salvation as if its basis were a benefit for the victims themselves. It is the basis of the interpretation by Augustinus of the “force them to enter” of Luke 14, 23; it is the argument of the Patriarch in Nathan the Wise when he states that the death of a child is preferable to its education in the enemy’s religion: “it is better, says the Templar, to perish than be saved at the cost of eternal damnation”; it is the stance of the papal legate and the leader of the *milites Christi* Arnaldo Amalarico, when in 1209 his crusades placed the cathars taking refuge in Beziers under siege: when somebody objected to him about the fate that would befall the Catholic residents, he responded: “Kill them all; God will know his own”.

It is for all of these reasons that so many have pondered the question of whether intolerance is intrinsic to the monotheist religions. The Mexican writer Jorge Volpi recently wrote: “The greatest problem created by the revealed religions - and in particular by the

most militant versions of Islam and Christianity - lies in their ecumenical and totalitarian character. At all times their believers - and in particular their priests - have become convinced of possessing *the* Truth: not *a* truth capable of being reconciled with other truths, but the only Truth possible. This is why monotheist religions are deeply antidemocratic, and also why there is a need to control their public activity nowadays” (El País, 26 January 2004). This evokes the judgment of the French novelist Michel Houellebecq, who has earned the anger of all the fundamentalist sectors, in that “faced with Christian, Jewish and Muslim fanatics who are still willing to die in Jerusalem - and in many parts of the World - in defence of their particular idea of the Truth, we have the memory of the old and tolerant Greek and Roman Politheism from which Democracy arose”.

Although there is much truth in these statements, it would not be very historical to attribute to Monotheism all the causes of religious intolerance. According to the document of Istanbul that carries the beautiful title of *Tolerance, the new name of Peace*, “the past offers us many examples in which, whatever the system of values, no society may boast of being intrinsically endowed with the virtue of tolerance and in which, on the contrary, no society can be accused of permanent intolerance”.

I do not mean that in order to guarantee tolerance it is necessary to renounce God, nor Monotheism. But it is convenient to reflect on the concept of God that monotheist religions have transmitted to us for centuries. Therefore, what shall be our concept of God? I, personally, prefer the profession of faith of Göethe’s *Faust*, which seems inspired by the words of Symmachus I spoke of at the beginning of this speech: “As great as is this eternal mystery, said Faust, fill your soul with it, and if you are happy with this feeling, call it what you will, Happiness, Heart, Love, God. I do not have a name for it”.

I hope, all of us participating in this multicultural and multireligious conference hope that the reflections that we express here contribute in some way to promoting Tolerance, the new name for Peace.