

**„LUCIAN BLAGA” UNIVERSITY OF SIBIU
DEPARTEMENT OF HISTORY, HERITAGE AND
PROTESTANT THEOLOGY**

**The Dynamics of Tolerance.
A Reassessment of the Concept from a
Historical and Systematic Perspective**

(Abstract)

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Abstract

Keywords

Tolerance, intolerance, identity, the other, persecution, coercion, truth, salvation, Christ, Tertullian, St. Augustin, Pierre Abelard, Thomas More, Sebastian Castello, John Locke, postmodernism, church, society, culture.

Premises

In a time when both access to information by way of modern technology and determined steps towards globalization taken by today's society, made pluralism become an important feature of present reality, the concept of tolerance manifests itself as an important subject both in theological research and ecclesiastic ministry. While in the past the distance between religions was well preserved by strict geographic delimitations/ boundaries and military interests, today things have experienced radical changes. With today's information explosion that has transformed the world into a *global village*, the religious traditions of tribes which until recently were barely known to the public, became part of the cultural menu which is offered every day to people directly in the intimacy of their houses by TV and computer screens. Thus, the cultural and religious diversity constitutes the framework within which the church carries out her mission. Tolerance manifests itself as a basic feature of this conglomerate of religions which sets the background of church life. This concept, treated both with suspicion and enthusiasm by the men of the church, is of crucial importance not only for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, but also for the scope of the mission entrusted to the church by Christ by the descriptive words addressed to the disciples: "you are the salt of the earth" and "you are the light of the world."¹ Church took many centuries of tumultuous existence to understand that her mission to be light to the world and salt to society is not incompatible with tolerance.

¹ Matthew 5: 13a, 14a.

On the other hand, recognition of the need for tolerance in order to maintain normality in a pluralistic society, brings into tension church's desire to be relevant and connect to postmodern man, and the evident need to maintain her identity intact/ unadjusted. The tension created by this situation points to another contributive factor, which is the voice or rather the voices of some minorities who demand their rights for free manifestation, and at the same time accuse church of rigidity, lack of openness, and intolerance that caused often marginalization, censorship and even stigmatization of nonconformist tendencies. These general observations constituted the initial impulse that inspired the present study.

This thesis aims to follow the main lines of theological argument around the concept of tolerance. While today tolerance is a concept studied rather in the research field of philosophy, politics, social studies and even historical studies with no major contributions from theology, it must be stressed that it owes its present prominent position to theology which gave the argumentative structure of the foundation on which was later consolidated as a strong conceptual edifice. Indeed, the first more or less coherent arguments for tolerance belonged to the religious framework, from which they derived, in time, as secular arguments.

A succinct presentation of the work

The present work contains three main parts which are three major steps of theological/ systematic evaluation and of historical perspective on the concept of tolerance.

The first part, of preliminary issues, is composed of two chapters (1 and 2) and tries to place the current research basis. The first chapter is focused on definitions. Recognizing the difficulty of providing a full definition of universal acceptance, the focus will be more on drawing a definitional framework with an interdisciplinary nature that enables theology to be able to relate constructively with other disciplines in order to run the complex definitional process as completely as possible. The second chapter looks at the concept of toleration through the eyes of modern research. Here we are interested to gain an as good insight as possible on how tolerance is regarded

today from both the theological and political philosophy perspectives. From the area of political philosophy we selected Susan Mendus as a representative of today's secular thought, in order to get a few point of comparison between Christian and secular perspective on tolerance. From the theological field we will focus on D.A. Carson, an American evangelical theologian who wrote extensively on the relationship between church and society, namely on our subject. Because the present research is conducted in a Romanian academic background, we considered it appropriate to look at an Orthodox perspective on tolerance; because Romanian theological contribution to research on the subject is almost non-existent, we will focus on a book of anonymous author, but very praised, claiming to represent the Orthodox position on tolerance.

The second part is also composed of two chapters (3 and 4) that try to follow the history of the concept of tolerance development. We do not propose a thorough analysis, but we are rather interested in understanding the trends of the time and the place of theology in those trends. Therefore we will select moments and characters of church history that are relevant to our study. Chapter three will make a trip along Christian antiquity and the middle Ages. In this chapter we will see both the context of a state of intolerance and timid beginnings of approaching the subject from a theological perspective (but in a quite unorganized manner). We will focus on Christian persecution in the time of church's illegality and Tertullian's plea for tolerance, then we look at Augustine of Hippo and at the way he viewed coercion during the settlement / consolidation times of Christian orthodoxy. We provide an overview of the state of tolerance in medieval context, using in a schematic approach Pierre Abelard's work. Chapter four follows the beginnings of systematic formulation of arguments for tolerance in modern times. In the select line of those who paved the way to understanding the subject we have Thomas More, Sebastian Castellio and John Locke. This chapter looks at the arguments used by those mentioned above and concludes with an overview of the current situation.

The third main part (allocated to chapter 5) aims at a settlement of the theological argument for tolerance organized around two reference points: the question of truth and the issue salvation. Around these two major points is built the entire final chapter which puts the theological understanding of tolerance in an

organic relationship with them. Diverse approaches of the truth will determine the Christian theologian to adopt different positions towards the *other*. Likewise, Christian understandings of salvation (through Christ or not necessarily) of those belonging to different religions, will place tolerance differently in certain theological frameworks. Out of the perspectives presented around the two points of reference, the positioning for absolute truth, objective and universal and for salvation through Christ, creates the potential for intolerance. Is tolerance possible in such an epistemological-soteriological arrangement? This is a question that will receive due attention in this chapter. The end of the work will be marked by an attempt to identify (rather as theological reflection, than as thorough research) the structure of a theological model for tolerance to be anchored in the two reference points as in two foundational pillars. The threefold reference to Christ (incarnation and earthly life, death on the cross and resurrection) will be proposed as the Christian foundation for understanding tolerance. This thesis ends by opening new horizons of research suggesting theological and practical directions for the church concerning her mission and the relationship with the *other*. The final conclusions will try to point out some theological and practical issues arising from the theological assessment of tolerance and its systematic formulation during this study.

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