

AN INTERFAITH DIALOGUE ON PAUL RICŒUR'S CHALLENGE OF TOLERANCE IN OUR DAY

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Abstract: This paper is projected as a dialogue. That purpose is offered as a natural extension of the way that Paul Ricœur worked on every philosophical problem. It is in his work on *The Just* that we have perhaps his clearest definition of dialogue, what he calls conversation. In that text he argues that there are several rules that govern authentic discussion which include the necessity to grant all a participation in the conversation and the need to provide reasons for whatever claims that are made. The rules require that all have the right to speak but assumes also listening with respect. Above all is the need for all to “accept the consequences of a decision”. That is, there is a need to compromise. This conclusion will become especially true of the topic in Ricœur’s work that we take up together in this paper, his reflections on tolerance, most especially his reflections on intolerance and the erosion of tolerance. Our dialogue engages the historical context of the original work, highlighting several Scriptural references to what Ricœur describes as tolerance, which are essential within his reflection on tolerance and its erosion.

Keywords: Indignation, indifference, intolerance, tolerance, the intolerable.

Résumé: Cet article prend la forme d’un dialogue. Ce choix prolonge la manière dont Ricœur abordait tout problème philosophique. C’est dans *Le juste* que nous trouvons ce qui semble être sa définition la plus claire de dialogue, et qu’il nomme conversation. Dans ce texte Ricœur soutient qu’il y a plusieurs normes régissant la discussion authentique, dont la nécessité d’accorder à tout le monde la possibilité de partici-

Resumo: Este artigo assume a forma de um diálogo. Essa escolha pretende ser um prolongamento da forma como Ricœur abordava todos os problemas filosóficos. É na sua obra *Le juste* que encontramos aquela que é, porventura, a sua definição mais clara de diálogo, a qual designava conversa. Nesse texto, Ricœur sustenta que existem diversas normas que regem a discussão autêntica, e que incluem a necessidade

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per dans la conversation, et le besoin de fournir des raisons pour les thèses soutenues. Telles normes établissent que tout le monde a droit à la parole but présupposent aussi l'écoute respectueuse. Sur-tout, il faut «accepter les conséquences d'une décision», c'est-à-dire, il faut arriver à un compromis. Cette conclusion s'applique de manière privilégiée au thème de l'œuvre ricœurienne travaillé dans cet article, à savoir, ses réflexions sur la tolérance, et spécifiquement ses réflexions sur l'intolérance et l'érosion de la tolérance. Notre dialogue discute le contexte historique du texte de Ricœur, soulignant plusieurs références des Écritures qui nous renvoient à ce que Ricœur décrit comme étant la tolérance, essentielles pour sa réflexion sur la tolérance et son érosion.

Mots-clés: Indignation, indifférence, l'intolérable, intolérance, tolérance.

de assegurar a todos a possibilidade de participar na conversa, e de providenciar razões para as teses avançadas. Tais normas requerem que todos têm direito a tomar a palavra mas também assumem a necessidade de ouvir de forma respeitosa. Acima de tudo, é preciso que todos “aceitem as consequências de uma decisão”. Ou seja, é preciso chegar a um compromisso. Tal conclusão aplicar-se-á de forma privilegiada ao tópico do trabalho de Ricœur que exploramos neste artigo, a saber, as suas reflexões sobre a tolerância, especialmente as reflexões sobre a intolerância e a erosão da tolerância. O nosso diálogo aborda o contexto histórico do trabalho original, sublinhando diversas referências das Escrituras àquilo que Ricœur descreve como tolerância, e que são essenciais para a sua reflexão sobre a tolerância e a sua erosão.

Palavras-chave: Indignação, indiferença, intolerância, o intolerável, tolerância.

1. Introduction: A Continuing Dialogue with Paul Ricœur

[Joseph Edelheit and James Moore]

This paper is projected as a dialogue. That purpose is offered as a natural extension of the way that Paul Ricœur worked on every philosophical problem. This may be especially true of the topic in Ricœur's work that we take up together in this paper, his reflections on tolerance (more especially his reflections on intolerance and the erosion of tolerance)³. It is in his work on *The Just* that we have perhaps his clearest definition of dialogue, what he calls conversation. In that text he argues that there are several rules that govern authentic discussion which include the necessity to grant all a participation in the conversation and the need to provide reasons for whatever

³ Paul Ricœur (ed.), *Tolerance Between Intolerance and the Intolerable* (Oxford: Bergahn Books, 1996).

claims that are made. The rules require that all have the right to speak but assumes also listening with respect. Above all is the need for all to "accept the consequences of a decision..."⁴. That is, there is a need to compromise. This latter point links closely with what Ricœur describes as tolerance, which is essential within Ricœur's reflection on tolerance and its erosion.

Though set in the context of decisions made in the court, these rules seem to be offered for all conversations. Ricœur follows this pattern throughout his work attempting to bring the several voices (authors, texts) into his reflection on every topic not merely as a support for his claims but mostly to engage each as a participant in his reflections⁵. A conversation reaches conclusions based on agreement by all parties even as the conversation continues without a forced final conclusion. This is clearly also represented in the format of *Tolerance Between Intolerance and the Intolerable* from which we are taking the primary text for our paper. In this book, Ricœur has invited an assortment of thinkers (not just philosophers) into a reflection on tolerance. The feel of the book is that each is not only a presenter but is also a segment of this conversation. Ricœur has presented this interaction especially as he writes introductions to each section both to clarify points made and to engage in a possible conversation (which then, in a gesture typical of Ricœur, invites the reader into this conversation. Thus, we believe our effort to engage each other in dialogue is not peripheral but central both to Ricœur's approach to reflection and to the topic of tolerance.).

These conversations in 1995 in Paris were organized and published first in the journal *Diogenes* and then as a book, in which we find important essays by Paul Ricœur. A noted Continental Philosopher, an active university professor in both France and the United States, Ricœur was a public thinker who sought to bring ideas into action. The last essay of the collection, "The Erosion of Tolerance and the Resistance of the Intolerable"⁶ offers 21st century thinkers a unique text to read at this critical moment of human history.

This paper is a dialogue, in response to those essays, an inter-religious dialogue between its two authors. This dialogue intends, with its critical reading of the religious sources about tolerance, to encompass a range of religious views. The hope is that our approach both in writing and in our reacting to each other in this text provides an important model for what Ricœur has implied is needed on this topic. As will unfold in the sections of this paper,

⁴ Paul Ricœur, *The Just* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 118.

⁵ Nothing in the book itself suggests what Ricœur's role was. Still the jacket description clearly states that "he has gathered together a number of participant thinkers..." Ricœur, *Tolerance Between Intolerance and the Intolerable*, op. cit.

⁶ Ricœur, "The Erosion of Tolerance and the Resistance of the Intolerable" in *Tolerance Between Intolerance and the Intolerable*, 189-201.

the current state of affairs seems to be especially fraught with a fragility that threatens not only tolerance but the very idea of public discussion, essential for any civilized democratic society. Because we sense this fragility, we believe that Ricœur's insights are especially prescient in suggesting ideas and possible developments that we see now emerging 27 years later.

2. Historical Contexts and Perspectives

[Joseph Edelheit]

We can appreciate the impulse to gather in Paris 50 years after the end of World War II, in order to reflect on a world that had liberated extermination camps, used the first two nuclear weapons, and then rebuilt both Europe and Japan, and welcomed nations that had been colonies. This meeting, sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), engaged upon the possibilities of an annual Day of Tolerance. The gathering produced the Declaration of the Principles of Tolerance, which are anchored in the 1945 Preamble to the Constitution of the UNESCO, which affirmed that, "peace, if it is not fail, must be founded on the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind." The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 adds this specific commitment: "that education should promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups."⁷

When they met, in 1995, with the past 50 years as the backdrop, their immediate experiences included the first indictments of genocide from the 1994 Rwanda massacres, the continued conflict in Bosnia from which the United Nations charged Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić for acts of genocide, a new Russian conflict began against Chechnya, an act of US domestic terror in Oklahoma City, and the assassination of the Israeli Prime Minister, Itzhak Rabin, a Nobel Peace Laureate. In 1995, HIV/AIDS virus reached its peak in the United States, as it became the leading cause of death for adults 25 to 44 years old. The global pandemic had already killed millions and caused social chaos among the communities most vulnerable to its transmission, and globally especially in Africa. Yet, despite what might have distorted their original impulse, their reflections produced UNESCO's Declaration of Tolerance which concludes: "In order to generate public awareness, emphasize the dangers of intolerance and react with renewed commitment and action in support of tolerance promotion and education, we solemnly proclaim 16 November the annual International Day for Tolerance" (article 6).

⁷ Ricœur, *Tolerance Between Intolerance and the Intolerable*, 207.

Tragically, now more than 25 years since these declarations and reflections, our immediate global circumstances have gotten worse as we ask ourselves the same questions. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have concluded, while a new war was initiated by Russia in the Ukraine which has destabilized Europe and the global economy. Since the beginning of HIV/AIDS pandemic, 79.3 million [55.9–110 million] people have been infected with the HIV virus and 36.3 million [27.2–47.8 million] people have died of HIV. 40 years of public health crisis were ignored during the recent 2.5 years of the COVID-19 pandemic which necessitated whole cities to lock-down in quarantines to prevent the spread, yet more than 15 million have died. Poverty, homelessness, and income stagnation are global issues; only a few thousand people among a global population of 7.9 billion people control more than 94% of global wealth. Most tragically, issues of autocracy and threats to democracy are more serious than at any time since the beginning of WWII.

The last major essay of this gathering was written by Paul Ricœur, “The Erosion of Tolerance and the Resistance of the Intolerable”, and as with so many of his essays, his conclusions are questions so the conversation will continue. This intellectual pattern helps to illuminate the title of Ricœur's essay even as it precedes the Declaration of Tolerance. Ricœur challenged those in attendance, and anyone who reads the text, not to assume that international organizations can simply ‘declare’ that tolerance is a reality, to be acknowledged once a year.

Ricœur's questions require answers from within our own generation. His insights are linked to a particular experience of history and suggested with a prophetic warning: “....at what do we recognize the intolerable? What is typically intolerable? In the name of what do we denounce the intolerable?”⁸ He describes it as “[...] reactive passion. It is this capacity that breaks with the dominant apathy of a society ready to accept everything as equally insignificant. Indignation is foremost a scream: It's intolerable!”⁹

3. An Intertextual Conversation with Jewish Perspectives

[Joseph Edelheit]

The human capacity to which Ricœur refers takes us back to the primal choice of moral knowledge in Eden. Without the human ability to discern between good and evil, we could not understand Ricœur's question about the intolerable:

⁸ Ibid., 197.

⁹ Ibid., 198.

And what are we to say about the knowledge of good and evil? Does it not sum up all the ambiguities of the human condition? Yes, this knowledge was obtained through the Fall, but it designates a henceforth irrevocable dimension of the human condition. It is no surprise that, in the Enlightenment tradition, and even beyond it, this knowledge was hailed as a ‘happy fall.’ This sort of challenge to the divine was required for humanity to attain its proper status, even at the price of the torments attached to this discernment and deplored by many sages. I am tempted to put it this way: that is how it is! Henceforth, human beings are confronted with making sense of this unhappy condition.¹⁰

Let us consider the text that describes humanity *immediately* prior to acquiring transformative moral discernment, but as a thought experiment substitute the word ‘intolerable’: “The two of them were naked, the man and his wife, yet it was not *intolerable*.” Instead of the first description of human affect, *shame*, the original humans are *tolerating* their innocence. After choosing to ingest moral knowledge, the first humans’ eyes are open, and they clothe themselves. Then they *hear*, God walking in the Garden, and hide, then God asks, “Where are you?” “Adam answers, we heard you and were afraid because we are naked...so we hid!” (Gen 3:8)¹¹. They *tolerated* their natural state, learned through moral self-awareness, clothed each other, and experienced God – whose initial prohibition provoked fear and remorse and so they hid/covered themselves even more, and now their choice was *intolerable*.

Does our thought experiment of substituting the *Intolerable* meet the standard of late 20th century reflection in Scripture’s description of the Fall, the primal act of Sin, now forever inherited by all humanity? Ricœur asks rhetorically, “[...] what is there in common between the disgust sparked by the crime of a pedophile, the horror that continues to inspire the stories of deportation and extermination camps, the contempt ignited by vicious attacks of rampaging slander against an honest man, the revolt against the manifestations of racism, against the disguised returns of slavery, against the extreme inequalities, against politics of exclusion?”¹²

This litany of the *Intolerable* has much greater specificity than what the first humans did in the Garden.

Maybe if we re-read Genesis 4:1-16, Cain and Abel, using *Intolerable* we might find an answer to Ricœur’s challenge. This narrative produces the first human death, created when one brother killed the other. Surely, this text offers us the paradigm of the *Intolerable*. Every reader knows this story,

¹⁰ André LaCocque and Paul Ricœur, “Thinking Creation” in *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 45.

¹¹ All references to the Hebrew Scriptures are to the translation found in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹² Ricœur, “The Erosion of Tolerance and the Resistance of the Intolerable”, 198.

but many have not read the text critically, and thus bringing their prior presumptions to subsequent readings. The first two siblings are defined as being very different, one a farmer and the other a herdsman. The elder attempts to express his gratitude to God for his harvest, the younger follows his brother's example and offers a 'choice' part of his flock. Here the narrative takes a strange turn, as God chooses to accept only one of the offerings, and then seems surprised when Cain is disappointed. God instructs Cain about his challenge, without any explanation or comforting empathy for taking the risk of expressing gratitude to the Creator, and having his offering rejected. Cain and Abel go to the field and suddenly without any textual transition, Cain kills Abel. God asks a question again: "Where is your brother?". Cain deflects, the text offers no affect or moral self-awareness, so God must hold him accountable. Cain is cursed, but the text does not use the experience to teach killing anyone regardless of the circumstances is *Intolerable*.

Like Ricœur's litany, Genesis 4 provides several possible experiences when we might have heard the scream, "It is *Intolerable*"! Consider what is missing from Genesis 4:5b, "Cain was much distressed, and his face fell." Should we read the text as suggesting it was intolerable to Cain that his offering had been ignored, he was much distressed, and his face fell? Cain had not been commanded to provide God with any expression of gratitude, and there were no directions about how any such offering should be done, as Cain was the first human to do this.

It must have been absolutely intolerable to have God ignore you, and then hear God attempt to encourage Cain to be morally strong. The next verse is missing the content of the conversation between the brothers, but can we imagine Cain screaming at Abel, "This is absolutely *Intolerable*! Why is my expression of gratitude unacceptable, why does God love you more than me?" Cain set upon his brother and killed him. Maybe, the missing content would help the reader determine if this first human death, the killing of a sibling, and then hiding behind a rhetorical question, would be acceptable as a paradigm of the *intolerable*.

Our thought experiment of substituting intolerable into these Scriptural passages, provides limited value. Ricœur challenges us: "But if indignation lets itself be recognized by its sweeping reactive character, through the diversity of its manifestations which would call for a subtle phenomenology, it is harder to find it a common object."¹³ These etiological narratives of sin should offer some shared sense of the *Intolerable* which all Humans experience in every generation; but the universal nature of the narratives lack the specificity Ricœur seeks.

¹³ Ibid., 198.

He might have pointed to this when he wrote: “Things become more obscure, and the ambivalence increases, if we move backward from this conquest to the earlier insinuations of the serpent and to the hermeneutics of suspicion that it began. Distinguishing good and evil, as a consequence, henceforth will be bound to the prior subverting of the confidence on which is based the *institution of language* [italics for emphasis].”¹⁴

Early in his career, Ricœur wrote about the human condition and language: “Language is not a wholly individualized human reality; no one invents language; its sources of diffusion and evolution are not individualized; and yet, what is more human than language.? Man is human because he speaks: on the one hand, language exists only because man speaks; but language also exists as an institution within which we are born and die. Is this not a sign that Man is not wholly individuated, but is both individual and collective?”¹⁵

This defining power of language returns us to Genesis 2:7, the first description of the human creation: God blew into his [human] nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being. According to *Targum Onkelos* [the Aramaic translation of Gen 2:7] God’s breath became a “speaking spirit” in Adam. Rabbi Shlomo ben Itzhak in his commentary on Gen. 2.7, relates intelligence with speech: “*a living soul: Cattle and beasts were also called living souls, but this one of man is the most alive of them all, because he was additionally given intelligence and speech.*”¹⁶

The first negative command/prohibition given to the first human relates to eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, moral discernment. Some rabbinic commentaries argue that ‘good and bad’ is a phrase that means ‘everything’, implying a mature perception of reality. Thus, knowledge of good and bad is to be understood as the capacity to make independent judgements concerning human welfare’¹⁷ Ricœur adds that “In the very essence of the individual, in terms of its quality as a subject; the image of God, we believe, is the very personal and solitary power *to think and to choose; it is interiority*. It is mythical *language* which best preserves the power of revelation contained *in the image of God.*”¹⁸ [italics added for emphasis]

Language and moral knowledge are powerful definitions and indictments of human responsibility, but are both fundamental and universal, we will not be able to agree upon a shared focus. Ricœur directs our reflection,

¹⁴ LaCocque and Ricœur, “Thinking Creation”, 45.

¹⁵ Ricœur, “The Image of God and the Epic of Man,” in: *History and Truth* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 113.

¹⁶ The *Chumash*, The Stone Edition, Rabbi Nosson Scherman (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1994), 11.

¹⁷ *Etz Chaim*, Torah and Commentary (New York, The Rabbinical Assembly, 2001), 14.

¹⁸ Ricœur, “The Image of God and the Epic of Man,” in *History and Truth*, 111.

"But not all of the intolerable lets itself be reduced to the resistance of intolerance to the maintaining of acquisitions and to the ulterior progresses of tolerance in the world or in ourselves. Perhaps one has to concentrate then on one word: *harm* [...]. Do no harm, minimal ethic. Prevent harm, minimal politic. Dispersed figures of harm but parented by all the harms gathered by indignation."¹⁹

Abraham Joshua Heschel forecasted Ricœur's scream: "It is intolerable!": "The prophet disdains those for whom God's presence is comfort and security; to him it is a challenge, an incessant demand. God's compassion, not compromise, justice, though not inclemency. The prophet's predictions can always be proved wrong by a change in man's conduct, but never the certainty that God is full of compassion. *The prophet's word is a scream in the night*. While the world is at ease and asleep, the prophet feels the blast from heaven."²⁰ [Italics for emphasis]. The visceral experience of Eduard Munch's "The Scream" has tragically become too much an image of both souvenirs and memes but remains a classic artistic expression of both Heschel and Ricœur; it's opposite, silence, also illuminates our focus of 'harm'.

Two survivors of the Nazi 'harm' which forever stained Europe and the memory of which prompted the meeting in Paris fifty years later, each provide the 'harm' of silence:

When I was the rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned under those tragic circumstances was that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is *silence*. A great people which had created a great civilization had become a nation of *silent* onlookers. They remained *silent* in the face of hate, in the face of brutality and in the face of mass murder. America must not become a nation of onlookers. America must not remain *silent*.²¹

In his December 10, 1986, Nobel Prize acceptance speech Elie Wiesel said: "We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. *Silence* encourages the tormentor, never the tormented." As silence affirms the harm, the prophetic 'scream' holds the community responsible for its behavior.

¹⁹ Ricœur, "The Erosion of Tolerance and the Resistance of the Intolerable", 199.

²⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2001), 16.

²¹ This is the speech of Rabbi Joachim Prinz, delivered in 1963, in the Civil Rights' March on Washington.

In another narrative, Scripture uses the ‘scream’ as foundational to redemption. Exodus 2:23-25 is the first time that the Israelites collectively express the pain of their oppression to God: “A long time after that, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out: and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God. God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites and God took notice of them.” Until the people could mature in their collective experience of slavery, and until that maturity gave them the power to understand their silence had kept them enslaved, only then: “A long time after that...’, did they cry out!

It was their collective scream that slavery was oppressive that God heard and only then acknowledged a relationship from a past which the community had not used. They cried out from within their experience of Egyptian cruelty, but then God heard and remembered the promise offered to past generations. Scripture’s classic origin story of Israel teaches that redemption requires awareness and the communal expression of the need to be helped even when the help for which we cry out is unknown.

When Ricœur wrote in 1995 that the crime of a pedophile was surely a shared scream of the *Intolerable*, no one could yet imagine the enormity of the systemic stain of both the crime and cover-up in the global Catholic Church. Sexual crimes against children are surely without any justification or defense, yet competing individual rights seem to infer at least some tolerance for even the pedophile. When such persons leave prison, they are required to remain under a communal listing of ‘sexual offender’, but where they live is a protected human right. The neighborhood is expected to ‘tolerate’ albeit unknowingly their presence. We have a paradox of legal claims, the pedophile is intolerable, but after he/she is punished their behavior remains on a public list, and still they are free to live among others behind a wall of tolerance.

Our times have further twisted this tragic paradox. A 10-year-old is raped and impregnated. She lives in a state which recently criminalized all abortions including for victims of rape and incest. The child is taken across the border to another where she can receive the medication needed to remove the six + week pregnancy. Each state’s attorney-general uses various social media platforms to challenge the veracity of the victim’s rape, challenge the right of the physician to offer medical care to the victim and then finally, to suggest that the physician’s treatment was *Intolerable!* The victim identified her rapist who then confessed to at least two acts of raping the 10-year-old.

Ricœur warned us in his 1995 essay: “Perhaps one has to concentrate then on one word: *harm* [...]. Do no harm, minimal ethic. Prevent harm, minimal politic. Dispersed figures of harm but parented by all the harms

gathered by indignation.”²² But the politicized discourse of so much of our contemporary communities, now intentionally ignores *harm*. The primal limits offered by Ricœur are no longer viable. Today the pedophile, even when identified and after a confession, is not the standard of the intolerable, rather the victim and her physician have become objects of communal and media judgement, maybe even criminal sanction, but the most basic of all ethics, Do NO harm, has been ignored! The screams provoked by all of this, are cancelled out because there are too many screams, there are too many divisions among those gathered by indignation. Whose scream will be heard by God and acknowledged worthy of redemption?

4. In Dialogue: An Initial Response with Christian Perspectives

[James Moore]

We begin this response with the simple but challenging phrase from Matthew 5 often translated as “You must be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect.”²³ That translation renders the Greek “telos” somewhat inadequately as the word really means complete and not perfect. If we then link this to the text of Genesis first with the image of God that Ricœur understands as the moral imagination, the humans are created not complete but opened to become complete. The traditional Christian understanding is that this is lost to a point in the rebellion in the garden as the humans choose to defy the divine command. However, their behavior indicates that the problem is not their defiance but rather their ignorance. They now have what they did not have before. They have knowledge, the knowledge of good and evil but it is naïve in that they cannot know precisely what is tolerable or intolerable, good, or evil. Their (that is, especially the man’s) choice to blame the other shows that they are like children in their use of this new knowledge. Did they know that their behavior was intolerable? Was the divine response a shriek of indignation?

This ignorance also appears in the response (Genesis 4:9) by Cain (Am I my brother’s keeper?) If Cain found the rejection intolerable, why did he not also find his actions to kill his brother intolerable? Why was this act for him a reasonable response to the rejection? Even the people in Egyptian oppression lacked the further knowledge needed to understand why they were crying out to God. In what way was their treatment by the Egyptians intolerable?

²² Ricœur, “The Erosion of Tolerance and the Resistance of the Intolerable”, 199.

²³ All references to the Christian Scripture are taken from Wayne Meeks (ed.), *The Harper Collins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993).

Likewise, the people in exile were ignorant since the knowledge of the covenant had faded so they could ask, “Upon whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” (Isaiah 53:1) It is through the guidance of the commandments that the humans could grow to know what is good and what is evil. Only with this knowledge is it possible to be justifiably indignant, a righteous anger. Mere spontaneous reaction out of feeling lacks the basis for the indignation, the reason why this knowledge is said to be redeeming by the prophet Isaiah.

If we return to the reflections by Ricœur about the erosion of tolerance, is it not possible that the foundation of this erosion is the loss of the guiding principles, the commands that form the basis of a any justification of what can be tolerated and what is intolerable. Still, mere knowledge outside of application is also incomplete. Each moment of choice builds on previous knowledge and the command to be complete then cannot be static as completion is not reaching a final goal but rather possessing the tools to act fully in the “image of God.” And, of course, if this knowledge is not retained, tolerance can become, as Ricœur argues, mere indifference.²⁴

5. The Emergence of Indignation: A Second Conversation with Christian Perspectives

[James Moore]

Recall an image from the early days of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine of a small child wandering the streets aimlessly having lost parents in the destruction. That image stuck with me as with so many others undoubtedly because the picture created an immediate response of outrage, what Paul Ricœur calls indignation in his essay, “The Erosion of Tolerance”. The feeling came to me not because I knew the child or even had any direct experience of the horror of that moment. The feeling was a spontaneous response that suggests that such indignation is a capacity in our human nature. That is what Ricœur’s description suggests even as he calls this response a “scream”.

I offer this note and image because the reflection we find in Ricœur on indignation requires actuality, a real human set of events, real suffering in order to clarify the nature of this spontaneous response. The response can arise in relation to many different kinds of events (as Ricœur notes, the object of indignation is diverse). Thus, while the feelings and the response are broadly general so that they can link to very different sorts of that which Ricœur calls “the intolerable, not even suggesting any equivalency between these types of events, of images. How is it, then, that we can feel the same rising anger

²⁴ Ricœur, “The Erosion of Tolerance and the Resistance of the Intolerable”, in *Tolerance Between Intolerance and the Intolerable*, 196.

in watching animals suffering as when we see the images from the Nazi death camps? Somehow, though we all know this feeling without much more explanation. This is the moral barrier that prevents us from slipping into the most egregious of the last stage of tolerance, indifference. Can we actually tolerate what is intolerable?

Still, we need to come back to the initial image. I was an onlooker from afar. We would need to be careful not to slip into a kind of voyeurism that even suggests that we know the actual experiences of the child. Our reaction does not mean that we are personally experiencing the pain of loss and destruction. We might empathize or even connect with some of our own experiences, but our indignation is not the same as the feelings of those caught in the midst of the horror. Those who react out of their pain (or of what we believe might be in the mind or the feelings of the child) are literally screaming since they are crying out a primal objection to what they can no longer tolerate. "This has to end." Do we dare forget that Ricœur experienced the inside of a prisoner of war camp or that at the time of the writing he was in the midst of a deeply tragic moment in his life? Can we read his essay without knowing this and that he is not asking us into an academic reflection but rather invites us into an interaction with (a dialogue with) the real people who have, who now do and who certainly will suffer from that which cannot be in any moral sense be tolerated?

There is still something else to be said and that also emerges in the essay by Ricœur. This response is spontaneous but does not arise from a moral reflection as if there is some standard violated. We might be able to offer some rationale for our indignation that can be found in our moral imagination, but the scream is primal. This comes from our humanity in the midst of unacceptable realities. Thus, any moral basis for the feeling comes as a justification for our disgust at the intolerable after the fact, a point so clearly voiced by Levinas and echoed in Ricœur's reflections on Levinas. However, Ricœur does seek reflection and definition not as some kind of final answer but as guideposts along the way in an open dialogical reflection with a host of scholars and friends that Ricœur chooses to invite to his table of conversation on any topic like this one on tolerance and the intolerable.

And there is yet one more aspect to bring into our thinking since Ricœur the philosopher is constantly also engaging texts, often religious, sacred texts as part of this conversation. Thus, we offer this dialogue on Biblical texts as an important extension of what Ricœur offers us in this important essay on the erosion of tolerance in part because it so fits Paul Ricœur the person and thinker. He would be excited by such a discussion even if this aspect of his intellectual and personal life is often ignored in reflections on his writing. In this part of our dialogue, we are drawn to two texts from Hebrew scripture

(Isaiah 52) and one text from Christian scripture (Matthew 5). What we offer is intended in ricœurian spirit as an open reflection that seeks to continue, not to assume a conclusion, only to suggest possible avenues from more complete understanding seeking even more reflection always to expand the understanding as well as the individuals who can join the conversation.

6. Contending With a Dream

[James Moore]

I was moved to reflect on Isaiah 52 because that text came to me in a dream.²⁵ What that means outside of being led to the text is not central to this reflection. However, turning to the text from Isaiah leads to important insight if we attempt to read texts as Ricœur has suggested intertextually. This kind of reading is what I have called a Midrashic reading since clearly the Christian scriptures are an interpretation of the received tradition, a midrash. The proposal is to read Isaiah together with Matthew 5. However, our reading reverses a pattern in using Isaiah as a way of understanding Matthew 5. Reading in this way opens up a clear challenge to what has been a standard understanding of Matthew 5 which also gives a Biblical basis for turning back to the rejection of the intolerable with a response of indignation, back to Ricœur. This also opens the door for dialogue represented at this point by a companion response from my coauthor.

Religion, namely Christianity, is particularly problematic since the apparent ethical model reflected in texts like Matthew 5 clearly contrasts with the history of Christianity. On the one hand, Matthew 5 suggests a command for tolerance in ways far beyond what might be expected even in a democratic society while the history of the Christian nations reflects episodes of extreme intolerance, especially with regard to other religious communities. In fact, the contrast is so obvious that the dictums of Matthew 5 appear to be completely ineffective in actually shaping the behavior of Christians, especially Christian leaders. This irony is seemingly obvious even while many within these communities either are naïve to this or choose to ignore it. In fact, the history of Christian behavior suggests that the behavior is characterized far more by levels of indignation than by any form of tolerance.

This basic problem for Christian thinkers presents a challenge that leads us back to Matthew 5 and, as noted above, now read in light of Isaiah 52 and 53. The particular texts of Matthew 5 pertinent to our discussion are included below:

²⁵ This is a reflection by James Moore on an actual dream experience.

38 You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."³⁹ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;⁴⁰ and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well;⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.⁴² Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. 43 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy."⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.²⁶

Our reflection is a textual analysis with concern to examine the implied ethic of the various statements that are presented as commands. In particular, the command that the followers of Jesus are not to resist the evildoer. This command is made clear with several examples that show the extent that such basic tolerance is to go. The examples are presented as that, thus suggesting even more possible similar examples than those emphasized and made clear with the concluding command to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you". Of course, the word "love" is not coupled with an action other than prayer, or to greet (that is welcome). The implied ethic is that followers of Jesus are to be tolerant to an extreme, essentially putting up with any possible wrong done. There is no indignation allowed in this ethic as if to argue that any follower is to keep taking the punishment as long as it lasts. There is no end to this tolerance. If understood in this way, the passage suggests a moral model of action (rather inaction in some ways) that resembles what Ricœur calls indifference.

However, if this model leads to such indifference, the extreme form of tolerance finally breaks as soon as harm is done and we react with the scream, indignance. Perhaps the model suggests that this works only when harm is done to the self. Even if we allow this, harm done to others, even potential harm, finally becomes intolerable. The moral model breaks down and cannot be an adequate reading of Matthew 5. We need to find another way that perhaps a reading of Isaiah 52-53 can provide.

Isaiah 53 has been a text that Christians have used to portray Jesus both in terms of the gospel narrative and in terms of theology. The gospels in fact portray parts of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus so as to make the link

²⁶ All references to the Christian Scriptures are to Wayne Meeks, editor, *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, op. cit.

obvious. In addition, the text has been used to understand the command given by Jesus to “take up the cross and follow me.” Thus, Isaiah 53 has been read Christologically for many Christians. However, such a reading cannot function within an open dialogue between Christians and Jews on this shared text. Instead, we can benefit by thinking through the text as it would have been understood by the generations that first heard the words. In addition, even that reading is more accurately informed by the link to Isaiah 52 (especially the concluding verses).

So, what can stand as a reading in the original context? We begin by setting the chapters into the historical context of the Babylonian exile. The opening verses of Isaiah 53 indicate as well that the timing is likely a generation or two in the exile so that there are those who still have a memory of the time before the exile even though it appears that this group is shrinking as time passes. Many more are those who were born in exile knowing no life other than that of the exile. Indeed, the setting would suggest that these would believe that there is no other life than the one they currently experience (akin to the situation of the people in Egyptian slavery).

The words that open Isaiah 53 show the situation of just such a mix of people as the prophet says “Who can believe what we have heard? Upon whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” (Isaiah 53:1) These people no longer have a memory of what was said before – the covenant promises and thus have no one to lead them in terms of what the Lord requires. The leadership was stripped away, and the practice of the religion had grown dim. Still, the potential for indignation is high as not only do they experience the oppression of exile and slavery (once again), but they now see themselves as without any standing. Thus, who would see this people as the people of God. They are of “no account.” (53:3)

Read in this way, the image of the servant now seems to apply to the people or at least some of the people. The question is clearly how will they respond to this oppression? The text presents an image of vicarious suffering that some or one will bear the burdens that belong to the whole in order to bring salvation. Clearly this idea is the reason why Christians through the generations have connected the text to Jesus as this is the central image for Christians of the meaning of the crucifixion. Still, this suggests something in addition with two curious passages.

The first of the passages comes in verse 10: “10: But the LORD chose to crush him by disease, That, if he made himself an offering for guilt, He might see offspring and have long life, And that through him the LORD’s purpose might prosper.” The text suggests that it is the vicarious suffering that is the will of God. While this fits the theology of Christian views of Jesus, it is not consistent with a notion that God is merciful in that the text implies that God

wills suffering. Instead, we are pressed to think again about what it is that is the will of God.

The second passage comes in verse 11: 11: Out of his anguish he shall see it He shall enjoy it to the full through his devotion. The NRSV translates the word as knowledge rather than devotion.”²⁷ The mystery is exactly what is this knowledge? The text appears to be open to several readings but is clarified by the last verses of chapter 52:

13: Indeed, My servant shall prosper,
Be exalted and raised to great heights.

14: Just as the many were appalled at him
So marred was his appearance, unlike that of man, His form, beyond human
semblance-

15: Just so he shall startle many nations.
Kings shall be silenced because of him,
For they shall see what has not been told them, shall behold what they never
have heard.

The link is a bridge that clarifies the entire message in chapter 53. The knowledge is that which is expressed in chapter 52 that God will hear the cries of the people and will redeem them:

⁸ Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices;
together they shout for joy,
for in plain sight they see
the return of the LORD to Zion.

⁹ Break forth; shout together for joy,
you ruins of Jerusalem,
for the LORD has comforted his people;
he has redeemed Jerusalem.

¹⁰ The LORD has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.”

The knowledge is that the Lord has returned to bring the people back to Zion, the covenant renewed. This text follows the pattern of the announcement to Moses (Exodus 2) that the Lord has heard the cries and will go down and deliver the people. All of this means that it is not the Lord's will that the people suffer but that they will endure the suffering because they have the knowledge of God's salvation.

²⁷ This alternative reference is offered to emphasize the impact of translation of all texts. The one-time reference here is from Wayne Meeks, editor, *The Harper Collins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993).

I return to the reflection on indignation and Matthew 5. Now having the text from Isaiah, Matthew 5 must be read differently. The text requires knowledge of the covenant to make any sense. In addition, the act of loving the enemy or even of turning the cheek can be not a model for behavior but rather a reminder that the covenant demands that we be aware of the other even as we are so easily led to condemn, even stereotype, and vilify those we see as enemies. Still, if this set of actions from Matthew would become a model for behavior, then it would dissolve into utter indifference. There would be no proper indignation, no reaction to the resulting harm. Such an ethic of indifference to harm is in complete contradiction of the ethic of the covenant so completely reaffirmed by Jesus according to the text earlier in Matthew 5: ¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

The challenge of our time is precisely the problem that there is no middle ground of dialogue through which the negotiations can happen demanded by the provisions of the law. Instead, we are confronted with the extremes that for Ricœur are characterized by massive indifference on the one hand and extreme and even violent indignation on the other. The first requires no dialogue since there is no ground for debate. The latter dismisses dialogue in the way that extreme indignation already settles the case with the other now always viewed as the enemy.

7. In Dialogue: A Response that Engages Suffering and Redemption [Joseph Edelheit]

Ricœur argues, “If then it were possible to recognize in indignation, an eminently reactive feeling, a positive motivation, it would be *the responsibility with regard to the fragile* in its multiple forms....”²⁸ “It is a “reflective equilibrium” of another kind that I would propose, between the virtuous anger of indignation and *a return to the forgotten roots of our culture.*”²⁹ [italics for emphasis]

These insights suggest that shared text from the Hebrew Bible for the Jewish/Christian dialogue is ideally one that sustains the conversation established above, especially one that offers further reflection on the intolerable. With Exile as the cornerstone of Isaiah 52-53, I suggest we use Psalm 137, as a textual response and dialogue prompt as Psalm 137 sustains the voice of exilic suffering.

²⁸ Ricœur, “The Erosion of Tolerance and the Resistance of the Intolerable”, 199.

²⁹ Ibid., 200.

Psalm 137:

1: By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat, sat and wept, as we thought of Zion.

2: There on the poplars we hung up our lyres,

3: for our captors asked us there for songs,

our tormentors, for amusement:

"Sing us one of the songs of Zion."

4: How can we sing a song of the LORD

on alien soil?

5: If I forget you, O Jerusalem,

let my right-hand wither;

6: let my tongue stick to my palate

if I cease to think of you,

if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory

even at my happiest hour.

7: Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites

the day of Jerusalem's fall;

how they cried, "Strip her, strip her

to her very foundations!"

8: Fair Babylon, you predator,

a blessing on him who repays you in kind

what you have inflicted on us;

9: a blessing on him who seizes your babies

and dashes them against the rocks!

Unlike Isaiah and Matthew, the Psalm does not offer access to the promise of return or eschatological redemption beyond the immediate burden of the *Intolerable*. Rather, more than any other text in the Hebrew Bible, this psalm portrays the desperate details of those living among their captors. The scene depicts humiliation and then resistance in order to sustain the memory of a past that might no longer be remembered, but only imagined. Surely, it is worthy to note that both the Psalmist and Isaiah frame their narratives with the experience of worship and music. For those whose spiritual lives no longer have access to the Temple setting, the narrative provides images that are not wistfully nostalgic but profoundly painful. Psalm 137 uses music, singing and memory devices of the captors' humiliation which enforces the experience of the biblical punishment of exile. "The textual features of dissonance and disorientation mirror facets of the experience of exile and return [...] "An exile is someone who inhabits one place and remembers or projects the reality of another... The task for the exile, especially the exiled artist, is to transform the figure of rupture back into a 'figure of connection' [...] For the exile, native territory is the product of heightened and sharpened memory, and imagination is, indeed a special homecoming."³⁰

³⁰ Michael Sidel, *Exile and the Narrative Imagination* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1996), ix-xii; in: Karl A. Plank, "By the Waters of a Death Camp: An Intertextual Reading of Psalm 137", *Literature & Theology* vol. 22, n.º 2 (2008), 184.

Exile is the worst punishment in the Hebrew Bible, we find its first use in Genesis when Adam and Eve are expelled from Eden and then when Cain is punished to wander eternally. Neither of these is the same as the Exile of Isaiah, as such punishment assumes being forced to leave your land, home, culture, and language. Not until after the conquest of the land when Joshua completes the task given to Moses can we actually apply the term ‘exile’. The prophetic threat is fulfilled twice when the Temples are destroyed, and the people forced to leave their homeland.

The punishment offers a radical shift of perspective; they failed to obey God, the prophets and keep the commandments and now they are required to both physically and spiritually look ‘back’ to find their correct path. Exile is possible only because the people were redeemed from Egyptian slavery. In other words, the origin story of the Exodus, is also the narrative basis for the actual burden of the Exile.

Redemption was only possible because Israel earned it, merited it by keeping Mitzvot. The rabbinic sages of the 2nd century argue that the commandment to purchase a lamb and slaughter it and use its blood to mark their homes was required in order for the promise and merit of redemption to be fulfilled. The *Mekhilta* quotes the opposing view of Rabbi Eliezer haKappar: “Did not Israel possess four mitzvot [while they were in Egypt] [...]: that they were sexually pure, that they did not gossip, that they did not change their names, and that they did not change their language!?” Being taken out of slavery required proof of their willingness to follow God’s direction, exile is the reverse: the failure to keep God’s will provokes expulsion from the land and God’s presence. Being in relationship with God is the source of both redemption and exile.

Still another rabbinic interpretation illuminates our primary focus of tolerance. “Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: I am יהוה. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage.” (Exodus 6:6) The Hebrew word, *Sivlot*, burden, also means tolerance. And in Modern Hebrew, the word *Savlanut*, means patience. The rabbis interpret the verse to suggest that God will redeem Israel from the burdens of its being able to tolerate their slavery. Here the 2nd century sages are teaching that assimilation had become a burden that require Divine intervention. Ricœur too worries that the paradox of tolerating the intolerable will lead to an indifference. “If indignation must be able to block the moral indifference in which tolerance is sinking, it is to the extent that it rings like an alarm.”³¹ How many different *alarms* are we able to hear today?

Finally, we have the classic Messianic content of Matthew 5, drawn from Leviticus 19 - The Holiness Code. “You shall not take vengeance or bear a

³¹ Ricœur, “The Erosion of Tolerance and the Resistance of the Intolerable”, 200.

grudge against members of your people. Love your fellow [Israelite] as yourself: I am יהודי.” (Leviticus 19:18). The Matthew passage offers us a radically redemptive promise; Matt 5:43: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy’.”⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven...” The command to love is contextual, do not seek vengeance, which changes the intention of love much deeper. Imagine the experience depicted in Psalm 137, the person humiliated by exile, whose memory of Jerusalem requires an intention of resistance, just as Leviticus and Matthew require. Yet, the suffering of this exile overflows with a pray for God’s justice, vengeance on behalf of the people who are indignant. If God heard their moans from Egypt, would God hear them from Babylon? Matthew and the final verses of Psalm 137 require a shared acceptance of the “not-yetness” of the final Messianic event, and such an event will also end the moral immaturity of tolerating the intolerable we now ignore.

The willingness to engage as Jews and Christians in these texts, in these questions, and to listen to our mutual fear and mourning, might be an opportunity for communities of faith to renew their faith in a future that we can share.

8. Conclusion: Unfinished Conversations

[Joseph Edelheit]

Paul Ricœur concluded his texts as if they were conversations that would continue as soon as the remaining questions were engaged. Our dialogue is unfinished as there are many questions that will need engagement, hopefully by others to whom we are presenting these ideas. We have taken our teacher’s challenge and brought Scriptural texts as shared dialogical platforms for reflection. We each brought fundamental texts that illuminate the complex ambiguity of the intolerable. Being human in scriptural terms begins with the choosing to experience moral knowledge which leads to an awareness of fear, hiding and then exile. Cain and Abel expand moral knowledge with jealousy, silence, the first death and then exile again. These primal Scriptural experiences offer our dialogue a shared origin of ignorance, an incomplete knowledge, that leads to flawed decisions. We learned that our self-awareness of our suffering gives way to ‘the scream’ to which God will respond, as in Exodus, the oppression of slavery prompts the people’s first communal expression that this is ‘intolerable’ which in turn prompts redemption. The same relationship evolves over time, promises of fidelity, and the constant human failure of that fidelity leads to the original sanction, exile, and again the screams!

Scripture’s narrative is our chosen platform, but each of us has also brought the immediacy of our time into the conversations, the ancient illuminates

the philosophy and the reality of today's intolerable affirms the prescience of Ricœur's insights. UNESCO's sponsorship of the 1995 gathering fifty years after the cataclysm of World War II, pushes the world of their work to the edge of a new century. None of them could have imagined that 27 years later, the then not-yet presence of the Internet and social media would transform the experience of the 'intolerable' to new depths of destructive impulses. In less than a decade we have permitted truth and trust in basic institutions to become dangerously eroded. Ricœur would not have suggested that the instantaneous global denial of truth would damage the human capacity for moral imagination. We have evolved/devolved from ignorance and then indifference to an intentional denial of communal ethics. Can we tolerate the rejection that being human requires an acceptance of common civil reality? When some choose to deny that we have eaten from the Tree of Moral Knowledge or deny that we ever had a sibling with whom we define our primary experience of the Other, how long can we tolerate the denial of Truth?

Ricœur, ever the historian of philosophy, was surely aware of the unknown future that loomed on their horizon, an inherent threat, with the phrase, "The Erosion of Tolerance". The term 'erosion', the gradual and inevitable weakening, reduction, loss, damage and even destruction of something. The most basic physicality of nature, the soil and rocks are subject to erosion by waves, rain, and wind; but so too are values and practices that over time are eroded by the constant forces of politics, culture and now technology. Ricœur's choice of this one term acknowledges his acceptance of the inevitability that 'tolerance', a product of centuries of culture, religion, and policies, like the largest granite boulder, would eventually diminish, and then finally be lost. He could not have imagined the radicality of the Earth's actual erosion in just 27 years but maybe this experience is a scientific confirmation of the denial and indifference that have also become so intolerable. We conclude with yet another reminder of Ricœur's scream, another warning of our own behavior:

Psalm 13

1: For the leader. A psalm of David.

2: How long, O LORD; will You ignore me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?

3: How long will I have cares on my mind, grief in my heart all day? How long will my enemy have the upper hand?

4: Look at me, answer me, O LORD, my God! Restore the luster to my eyes,

5: lest I sleep the sleep of death; lest my enemy say, "I have overcome him," my foes exult when I totter.

6: But I trust in Your faithfulness, my heart will exult in Your deliverance. I will sing to the LORD, for He has been good to me.

"How long, O Lord?" can we tolerate, endure, and suffer, the public erosion of our values?

Ricœur understood then what we have yet to accept, that the erosion can only be stopped by our shared commitment to the resistance to the intolerable.

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