

FERENC RUZSA

(*Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest*)

## Unfaithful Words: Tolerance<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Anyone translating religious or philosophical texts of far-away cultures is painfully aware of the impossibility of the enterprise, essentially on account of the lack of terms with near-identical meaning. However, the words are only the surface: the real problem is with the different concepts they express.

The same problem reappears when we try to describe and understand these cultures. Words like religion, creed, faith, belief, prayer, worship, church, heresy, conversion, and idol are far from the neutral scholarly terms they appear to be: they all are heavily laden with features and associations that derive from the context in which these concepts evolved. These are essentially Christian concepts, and their use about other cultures is ‘Orientalism’ in Said’s sense.

‘Tolerance’ is a pertinent example. For example, Buddhism is generally considered to be an extremely tolerant religion. While this insight reflects a real feature of Buddhism, still it is not true. Buddhism is as tolerant as a deer is vegetarian. The deer does not refrain from eating flesh: it has absolutely no wish to eat, touch, or even smell meat. Buddhism simply does not have the idea that everybody should be Buddhist. The Buddha himself unambiguously expressed his opinion that it is best for people to keep their traditional rites and beliefs. Further, it seems that Buddhism is not a very special case; rather it appears that the idea that other religions should be suppressed is an innovation of the Abrahamic religions only.

There is an important lesson to be learned from this for interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Tolerance is miserably inadequate as a ground for such contacts. You ‘tolerate’ what you do not like, what you would like to annihilate, just out of some practical wisdom you restrain yourself. We do not want to be merely ‘tolerated’; we want to be accepted, esteemed, and possibly even loved—and the same holds for our partners in the dialogue.

This is anything but a light demand on most participants of the dialogue. However, unless they wholeheartedly accept that there are innumerable valid and valuable paths, their ‘interreligious dialogue’ will remain little more than an uncomfortable ceasefire between hostile powers.

**Keywords:** tolerance, Buddhism, linguistic relativity, inclusivism.

---

<sup>1</sup> The researches of the author were supported by the OTKA (National Research Fund) projects no. K 112253 and K 120375. A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the International Conference *Inter-religious and Inter-cultural Dialogue in a Pluralistic World. Philosophical and Theological Perspectives* (1–2 June 2016, Constanta, Romania).

## 1. The impossibility of translation

Understanding is the first step towards understanding. That is, in order to understand people, to sympathise with them and accept their behaviour, I have first to understand *what* they are doing and *why*. When I see a group of strong adults holding tight a miserable boy and one of them is approaching the youngling's penis with a knife, I may feel horror and a strong impulse to interfere. If I have a gun, perhaps I will even shoot at the man with the knife. However, if I know that what they are doing is circumcision, that it is a traditional ritual for them, and that its aim is to turn the boy into a grown-up, without which he cannot hunt, marry etc., my perception changes radically. I notice now that the men are not aggressive at all. They care about the boy, and some of them may recall their own initiation. I may appreciate their discipline and determination as they perform this emotionally difficult task.

To make that first step, to understand what they do, what they think, and what they believe in, we have to listen to what they say—and when it is a different culture with a different language, that presupposes translation. Anyone translating religious or philosophical texts of far-away cultures is painfully aware of the impossibility of the enterprise, *prima facie* on account of the lack of terms with near-identical meaning. However, the words are only the surface: the real problem is with the different concepts they express.

On the level of words, the two most apparent cases are when we do not know what they mean and when they refer to a thing unknown in our culture. The first is unpleasantly frequent in ancient texts: there are many *hapax legomena*, words occurring only once in the texts we have. When their etymology is unclear and the context is not too specific, we simply cannot have any idea of their meaning. The second case can be a local plant or animal, but most frequently it is a man-made object, such as a piece of clothing like *dhoti* or a weapon like *shuriken*, to quote not-so-unknown examples.

Although these cause us a lot of headache, from a theoretical perspective they are not too interesting. Sometimes, however, the meaning is clear and well known in both cultures, but the limits of the relevant concepts differ. The opposition boat–ship can be found in many languages, but their ranges differ; in Hungarian even a small sailboat for two people is called a *vitórlás hajó*, ‘ship with sails’, while in English a quite sizeable passenger vehicle on a river or lake is called a boat. Moreover, of course, most other languages will not call a nuclear-powered submarine a ‘boat’.

Another, and again quite frequent version of the problem, is where one language does not normally express a difference while in the other it is unavoidable: for example, *nau* in Sanskrit means both ‘boat’ and ‘ship’. A conspicuous

and particularly annoying case is where one language always expresses gender and the other does not. ‘A customer came in and I told her to wait’. This sentence is untranslatable into Hungarian, since the language has no gender-marked pronouns, and in everyday speech there is no general term for female (*lány* is a girl or young woman, *asszony* a presumably married middle-aged woman etc.). Here the resulting translation will only be awkward, but in the reverse case the task is almost unsolvable—you cannot keep on writing (s)he, her/him etc.

When we turn to religious and philosophical terminology, the difficulties are much more serious. Words in this sphere do not refer to more or less clearly identifiable things and phenomena of the external world but to fictitious entities and intangible internal experiences. Such concepts are normally quite vague even for the best-informed native speakers. Does a fairy have wings? Are dwarfs always male? What language do devils speak among themselves? Can the spirits of the departed fall in love? When we pick any translation, we lose many aspects of the original idea and we add, whether we like or not, many associations of our traditions.

The real danger is that we may be unaware of the differences of the relevant concepts. If we render the Sanskrit word *puruṣa* into English as ‘soul’, this is quite defensible, since in the Sāṃkhya philosophy *puruṣa* is the immaterial, eternal substance of a person. However, it is not the source of emotions, it cannot make decisions, and it does not think—all these are done by subtle material entities, mostly the *buddhi*, ‘intellect’. We may also translate the Sanskrit *ātman* as ‘soul’, again correctly, but then the well-known characterisation of the materialists that they hold that the body is the *ātman* will sound absurd. Again, the Buddhists categorically deny that there is an *ātman*; still, they believe in transmigration.

Such problems occur in any translation but to differing degrees. When translating Greek into English or Swedish into Italian, they are manageable, but when translating from Chinese or Indonesian, they are overwhelming. This has got nothing to do with language families: Sanskrit is an Indo-European language, still the difficulties are great, while with Hungarian, a Finno-Ugric language, there is no special problem. This is because European languages share a common cultural history. All these nations have translated the Greek philosophers and the Bible into their own language, and they wrote their legal codes originally in Latin. Moreover, the people started to use their own words with meanings according to these international standards. Therefore, it is quite sensible to speak of a Standard Average European (SAE) language:<sup>2</sup> although the phonemes, words, and surface syntax of the individual European languages

---

<sup>2</sup> Whorf 1956a: 138.

differ completely, still they are almost isomorphic. Practically the same things can be expressed in all of them. Moreover, this is emphatically true of their religious and philosophical terminology, since these have been eminently international enterprises for more than two millennia, mostly sustained by the Christian church and the universities.

### 1.1 Radical translation

There is a much stronger thesis in analytic philosophy, variously called the inscrutability of reference or the indeterminacy of translation. Our arguments so far pointed out some more or less interesting difficulties in understanding and translating *certain* words. This theory, however, states that we can never get at the true meaning of *any* expression, including such everyday words as ‘boy’, ‘sit’ or ‘red’.

The thesis was developed in 1960 by Willard Van Orman Quine in ‘Translation and meaning’, the second chapter of his probably most famous book, *Word and Object*. He illustrated the problem with the thought experiment of ‘radical translation’ (i.e., trying to understand a completely unknown language without any external help—no dictionary, grammar book, or interpreter). Somewhat simplified, the story goes like this: when the hypothetical linguist hears the native say ‘*gavagai*’ on noticing a rabbit, he will guess that the word does mean ‘rabbit’. After repeated checking he will be quite sure of it, but he may be mistaken—

For, consider ‘*gavagai*’. Who knows but what the objects to which this term applies are not rabbits after all, but mere stages, or brief temporal segments, of rabbits? In either event the stimulus situations that prompt assent to ‘*Gavagai*’ would be the same as for ‘Rabbit’. Or perhaps the objects to which ‘*gavagai*’ applies are all and sundry undetached parts of rabbits; again the stimulus meaning would register no difference. When from the sameness of stimulus meanings of ‘*Gavagai*’ and ‘Rabbit’ the linguist leaps to the conclusion that a *gavagai* is a whole enduring rabbit, he is just taking for granted that the native is enough like us to have a brief general term for rabbits and no brief general term for rabbit stages or parts.<sup>3</sup> [*italics added*]

---

<sup>3</sup> Quine 2013: 46.

This is clearly not the place to assess the merit or otherwise of Quine's position, but it can be safely said that the thought experiment fails to convince. Let us get hold of a rabbit somehow, then lift its ear and ask the native: '*Gavagai?*' If '*gavagai*' means 'undetached rabbit part', he will agree, but if it means 'rabbit', he will probably laugh, disagree, or say something like '*Kunu! Gavagai-kunu*'. Then we will add another item to our tentative vocabulary: '*kunu = ear?*'

More interestingly, Quine's second alternative translation, 'rabbit stage' is less hypothetical than it seems. For in many Buddhist traditions, momentariness is a fundamental fact of the world: there are no continuous existents; everything lasts a single moment. What appears as a single enduring entity is in fact but a series of momentary phenomena, causally related. So these people, at least when philosophising, do mean 'rabbit-moment' (as it is frequently expressed) when they say 'rabbit'. What this fact shows is not only that such peculiar language is really possible, but also that we can know of it: it is unusual, but there is no inscrutability of meaning here. Accidentally it also suggests that this sort of problem is not too closely related to language—for Buddhists speak many different languages, including English, Chinese, and Sanskrit. Furthermore, many speakers of these languages are not Buddhists, and for them 'rabbit' means plainly rabbit, not a rabbit-moment.

It is of course true that given only limited information, we cannot be sure of the meaning, but this is nothing new. It is essentially the problem of the *hapax legomenon* type. Scholars of distant languages and cultures routinely address such problems, and many publications aim at more clearly delineating the meaning of some previously not fully understood term. They clearly demonstrate that there are reliable ways to approach such questions and often even to give a convincing answer to them.

## 1.2 Linguistic relativity

So far, we have investigated the lexical level only, which is the most conspicuous and therefore somewhat easier to handle. Of course, words do not exist in isolation; again, most clearly, their meanings are interrelated. This was already suggested by some of the examples above, including ship–boat and soul–intellect (*puruṣa–buddhi*).

There is, however, a much deeper and more obscure difference among the languages. This notion is frequently, although somewhat misleadingly, called the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis. It was, indeed, hinted at by Edward Sapir in a presentation to the Linguistic Society of America in 1928:

Human beings... are very much at the mercy of the particular language... The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.<sup>4</sup>

The idea was elaborated and given real significance in the work of Benjamin Lee Whorf, who called it the linguistic relativity principle.<sup>5</sup> In 'Languages and logic', he described how our seemingly instinctive logic and metaphysics are dependent to a surprising degree on our mother tongues.

The effortlessness of speech and the subconscious way we picked up that activity in early childhood lead us to regard talking and thinking as wholly straightforward and transparent. We naturally feel that they embody self-evident laws of thought, the same for all men.<sup>6</sup>

Unreflectively we are even tempted to feel that these laws are necessary. Any intelligent being would think similarly, because they reflect the laws of the world or even any possible world. In philosophy, at least since Kant, it is customary to doubt this. An attractive modern formulation was given by Putnam: 'the mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world'.<sup>7</sup> Whorf's position is more complex—he introduces a third factor into the matrix, our particular language.

Segmentation of nature is an aspect of grammar – one as yet little studied by grammarians. We cut up and organize the spread and flow of events as we do, largely because, through our mother tongue, we are parties to an agreement to do so, not because nature itself is segmented in exactly that way for all to see. Languages differ not only in how they build their sentences but also in how they break down nature to secure the elements to put in those sentences.<sup>8</sup>

Whorf gave a detailed description of the phenomenon in his best-known paper, 'The relation of habitual thought and behavior to language'. This quite involved article is full of information on the contrasts of Hopi and SAE (with English as an example) grammar and even overloaded with intriguing insights about their effects on our world-views. They have inspired many volumes of scholarly work. Some of those insights that are relatively easily grasped may be quoted here:

---

<sup>4</sup> Sapir 1985: 162.

<sup>5</sup> Whorf 1956b: 214.

<sup>6</sup> Whorf 1956c: 238.

<sup>7</sup> Putnam 1981: xi.

<sup>8</sup> Whorf 1956c: 240.

Newtonian space, time, and matter are no intuitions. They are receipts from culture and language. That is where Newton got them.

Our image of time as an evenly scaled limitless tape measure persuades us to behave as if monotony were more true of events than it really is.

Our objectified view of time is, however, favorable to historicity and to everything connected with the keeping of records.<sup>9</sup>

This last remark may seem especially pertinent for students of those cultures that, like ancient India, seem to have no historical sense. A vast amount of research was spent on the largely unsolvable problems of Indian chronology, since we are unable to cope with the lack of a clear timeline.

If I read him correctly, Whorf even suggested that our basic paradigm of mind-body dualism is partly rooted in linguistic usage, especially our extensive use of spatial metaphors. ‘The Hopi thought-world has no imaginary space’, so when he thinks of his cornfield, he is not dealing with an idea but the real thing, and he believes that his thinking may influence it.<sup>10</sup>

Most important for the understanding of the history of philosophy is the language-dependence of the basic categories of substance, matter, and form.

The SAE microcosm has analyzed reality largely in terms of what it calls ‘things’ (bodies and quasibodies) plus modes of extensional but formless existence that it calls ‘substances’ or ‘matter’. It tends to see existence through a binomial formula that expresses any existent as a spatial form plus a spatial formless continuum related to the form, as contents is related to the outlines of its container. Nonspatial existents are imaginatively spatialized and charged with similar implications of form and continuum.<sup>11</sup>

One aspect of this phenomenon is that a speaker of SAE can only view the world as made up of substances (in the Aristotelian sense [i.e., things and living beings]), and only these substances can have qualities and only they can move. The reason for this is that SAE has three distinct categories: noun, adjective, and verb (on the sentence level: subject, qualifier, and predicate). We cannot speak and therefore cannot think without specifying the ‘thing’ that is such or does an action. Even when it is plainly contrary to experience, we tend to specify a distinct subject: ‘The weather is cold’ or ‘The wind is blowing’. In many SAE

---

<sup>9</sup> Whorf 1956a: 153–154.

<sup>10</sup> Whorf 1956a: 149–150.

<sup>11</sup> Whorf 1956a: 147. Note that Whorf uses the word ‘substance’ in the everyday sense of ‘matter’ (in philosophical terminology: substratum), not in the Aristotelian way of primary and secondary substances (individuals and universals), for which Whorf uses ‘things’.

languages, even in the most impersonal form, at least a formal, dummy subject has to be given: ‘It’s cold’ or ‘It is raining’. Therefore for us it is extremely difficult to grasp the idea of insubstantiality, and we feel it very strange how this unnatural idea could become so widespread in Buddhism. The explanation can easily be that many of the languages involved (Dravidian in India, also Tibetan and Chinese) do not have these three basic grammatical categories. The opposition noun–verb exists in these languages (although it behaves quite differently from SAE), but they lack a distinct category for adjectives.<sup>12</sup> These people do understand our concept of substance, but they do not need it for speaking or thinking. For them the question is meaningful and clear: are substances real in a fundamental, metaphysical sense, or are they merely one convenient way of segmenting experience?

The Buddha himself may not have known Dravidian (he taught in Māgadhī, an Indo-Aryan language), but it is irrelevant here, for three reasons. Substance reductionism was not his invention, although he probably agreed with it; it was developed earlier in the Sāṃkhya tradition.<sup>13</sup> The greatest Buddhist exponent of insubstantiality, Nāgārjuna, lived in South India, so his mother tongue must have been Dravidian. Lastly, the question was not how someone could suggest this theory—great thinkers can come up with difficult ideas. Our question was why it was widely accepted.

## 2. Describing the other

We have seen that perfect translation is impossible, even when the translator knows everything about the language that can be known. Still, a good enough translation is a realistic ideal. Many of the problems mentioned above can be circumvented with notes and other explanatory material.

With this, we have arrived at the second step of trying to understand a culture different from our own: analysis and interpretation. Of course this is a second step only logically—in reality, both translation and description presuppose each

---

<sup>12</sup> About Dravidian: ‘Proto-Dravidian has just two parts of speech, noun and verb... While some scholars have projected the category of adjective to Proto-Dravidian, many of the candidates for adjectival status appear to be defective nouns or verbs.’ Steever 2020: 17.

About Tibetan: ‘As in other Tibeto-Burman languages, adjectives are formally nouns’. DeLancey 2017: 373.

About Chinese: ‘The lack of inflectional morphology in modern Chinese makes it very difficult to define grammatical categories in terms of morphological features’. ‘The so-called adjectives are but stative verbs (Vstat), erroneously identified as equivalents to adjectives in familiar Indo-European languages’. Yue 2017: 114, 121.

<sup>13</sup> Ruzsa 2017: 168–170.



other. There is mutual feedback here. A new translation leads to better analysis, and a fresh interpretation necessitates retranslation. Advances in these two areas of scholarship go hand in hand.

Interestingly, at the level of generalisation and description the very same problems reappear. Here, the inadequacy of our concepts is far less apparent, but it is actually more important. We are trying to use objective, culture-neutral, precise terms, but in fact, we do not have them. Consider such natural and seemingly innocent descriptive terms as country, king, law, book, family, or beggar. They are all part of our everyday vocabulary and therefore have associations that can be quite misleading, and they are connected to value judgements that may be inappropriate. That is why everybody translates the Sanskrit *bhikṣu* (beggar) as (Buddhist) ‘monk’, but it is again misleading, just in another way.

Closer to our special topic here, words like religion, creed, faith, belief, prayer, worship, church, temple, idol, heresy, and conversion are far from the neutral scholarly terms they appear to be. They are all heavily laden with features and associations that derive from the context in which these concepts evolved. These are essentially Christian concepts and their use about other cultures is ‘Orientalism’ in Said’s sense.<sup>14</sup> In his much debated book, Said suggested that already the term ‘oriental’ (i.e., ‘in the East’) is strongly suggestive of an Eurocentrism and at the same time insensitivity to the essential differences of ‘the other’, lumping together, for example, Islamic, Indian, and Chinese cultures, seeing in them only variants of the exotic. He also emphasised that oriental studies, irrespective of the personal wishes of the individual scholars, essentially served the interests of colonisation and exploitation and not disinterested mutual understanding.

It seems that Orientalism is but a new name for, or at most, a particular form of ethnocentrism—another less-than-lucky term for the phenomenon, coined by Sumner more than a century ago. It expresses the natural human tendency, well recognised already in antiquity, to consider our own society and norms as natural and good and see all others as inferior and deviant. When describing another culture in terms of our own, we imperceptibly yield to ethnocentrism. Such a perfectly factual statement that ‘they lack a clear concept of a creator god’ does in fact suggest primitivity. It is like storks describing our species, quite accurately, as ‘wingless and lacking a proper beak’.

The dangers of ethnocentrism are well recognised; efforts at a ‘politically correct’ use of language clearly reflect this. The related difficulties are most often emphasised in the proper field of study describing other cultures: anthropology. The suggested antidote to this innate proclivity is cultural relativism, although many opponents see in this idea an attempt at undermining the fundamental ethical values of civilisation, religion, or humanity itself.

---

<sup>14</sup> Said 2003.

## 2.1 Cultural relativism

Although largely an autodidact, Whorf also studied under Sapir, whose mentor was Franz Boas, the father of American anthropology. Boas seems to stand at the root of many of the ideas outlined above; although the term is not his, he is generally considered to be the source of cultural relativism. This idea, or rather approach, seems nowadays so evident when expressed that it is difficult to realise its importance. ‘To achieve the fullest understanding of any culture, we should not begin by applying to it the patterns and values of another culture’.<sup>15</sup>

This seems to be quite similar in spirit to the old adage, *Duo quum faciunt idem, non est idem*.<sup>16</sup> If somebody has another person killed, he may be committing a crime (if he is a mafioso), or he may be dealing out justice (if he is a king). Cultures are not persons, yet their customs and traditions should not be understood and evaluated based on our culture’s norms—a feature in a culture might have an utterly different significance from something apparently quite similar in another culture. Also, a person’s behaviour has to be understood in terms of their own culture.

The obvious requirement is to give up our prejudices and forget our value judgements—not only ‘cruel’, ‘immoral’, and ‘disgusting’ but also ‘silly’, ‘funny’, ‘ineffective’, ‘childish’, and ‘irrational’ are quite out of place. The more difficult task is to notice the inadequacy of value-free concepts. When we try to analyse the economy of a hunter tribe, we may be artificially isolating a part of their activities, because in our culture economic activity is clearly a distinct segment of life.

Cultural relativism does not imply moral relativism. It is a mistake to think that cultural relativism can be used to justify any immoral behaviour, saying that there are no objective norms. First, it does not teach that what is appropriate in one culture should be accepted in another: the exact opposite is true. Second, it does not say that what people do according to their own traditions is proper: it refrains from saying if it is good or bad. When studying cannibalism, the anthropologist is not supposed to actually like the idea, but they have to investigate why, when, and how it is done, who the victims are etc. Third, and most interesting is that cultural relativism can be actually used as a research programme for universal values. This is because ‘true comparison deals impartially with likenesses and divergences as analysis reveals them’, and when a likeness is

---

<sup>15</sup> Kroeber – Kluckhohn 1952: 176, fn. 39.

<sup>16</sup> ‘When two do the same thing, it is not the same thing.’ Although not a direct quote, it is taken from Terence’s drama *Adelphoe* (Brothers), 823–825: *duo quom idem faciunt, saepe ut possis dicere / ‘hoc licet inpune facere huic, illi non licet’, / non quo dissimilis res sit, sed quo is qui facit.*

found everywhere, we may say that it is essential for humanity, not because it is in the Bible or for some *a priori* reason, but because it is universal.

True universals or near universals are apparently few in number. But they seem to be as deep-going as they are rare. Relativity exists only within a universal framework. Anthropology's facts attest that the phrase 'a common humanity' is in no sense meaningless.<sup>17</sup>

Cultural relativism does not stand for the incomparability of cultures that can be studied only in isolation. It essentially supports comparison, not, however, based on preconceived external criteria (obviously taken from the anthropologist's own culture) but rather on the features and categories of the studied cultures themselves. Only this way can true, organic parallelisms and eventually even historical connections be demonstrated. Therefore, the aim is not to show up some unbridgeable gap between different cultures but to get closer to real understanding. As John Carroll wrote about linguistic relativity:

It would have been farthest from Whorf's wishes to condone any easy appeal to linguistic relativity as a rationalization for a failure of communication between cultures or between nations. Rather, he would hope that a full awareness of linguistic relativity might lead to humbler attitudes about the supposed superiority of Standard Average European languages and to a greater disposition to accept a 'brotherhood of thought' among men.<sup>18</sup>

Through a proper understanding of another culture, its words, concepts, values, and logic, we will also see ourselves in a new light. Noticing our preconceptions, we might be able to overcome some of them and in the end understand our own culture better.

### 3. Tolerance

In intercultural and interreligious dialogue, tolerance is often put forward as the right approach to our partners. In this sense it is a normative concept: that is how we should behave or at least try to behave. However, it is also a descriptive concept. Some traditions, political parties, and religions are said to be more tolerant than others.

---

<sup>17</sup> Kroeber – Kluckhohn 1952: 177, fn. 41 and 178.

<sup>18</sup> Carroll 1956: 27.

Several Eastern religions are famed to be quite tolerant, especially Buddhism, and not without reason. Investigating this question will be an object lesson in cultural relativism, demonstrating how inappropriate this European-Christian concept is in characterising other religions. At the same time, more importantly, it may motivate a modification in our normative approach—perhaps, after all, it is not tolerance that we need in approaching, for example, other religions.

### 3.1 A tolerant religion?

Buddhism is generally considered to be an extremely tolerant religion. This insight reflects a real feature of Buddhism. Buddhism is emphatically non-aggressive, and although it is a missionary religion, it does not try to suppress other creeds. In addition, the widely different branches or sects of Buddhism can peacefully co-exist and cooperate and even build common organisations. In many monasteries monks of several sects live together, and practically all branches of Tibetan Buddhism accept the leadership of the Dalai Lama.

Yet to characterise Buddhism as tolerant is false and misleading. A true Buddhist is no more tolerant than a deer is vegetarian. The deer does not refrain from eating flesh: it has absolutely no wish to eat, touch, or even smell meat.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the Buddhist does not want to convert a Muslim or a Hindu—they think that it is the natural order of things that different people have different religions. Buddhism simply does not have the idea that everybody should or could be Buddhist.<sup>20</sup> The Buddha himself unambiguously expressed his opinion that it is best for people to keep their traditional rites and beliefs.

— What have you heard, Ānanda: do the Vajjīs show respect, honour, esteem, and veneration towards their shrines, both those within the city and those outside it, and do not deprive them of the due offerings as given and made to them formerly?

— I have heard, Lord, that they do venerate their shrines, and that they do not deprive them of their offerings.

— So long, Ānanda, as this is the case, the growth of the Vajjīs is to be expected, not their decline. ...

Once... I dwelt at Vesāli, at the Sārāndada shrine, and there it was that I taught the Vajjīs these seven conditions leading to (a nation's) welfare.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> This is, of course, a parable, not an accurate description of the animal's behaviour.

<sup>20</sup> The famous Mahāyāna bodhisattva vow 'to liberate all sentient beings' should not be taken literally. Rather, it is an expression of universal goodwill and altruistic ethos.

<sup>21</sup> *Dīgha-Nikāya* 16, 1.4 and 5, quoted from Sister Vajirā – Story (tr.) 1998/2007: 5–6.

The Buddha also suggested that when someone lives in a foreign religious environment, he should not reject that religion or its gods:

Wherever he may dwell, the prudent man...  
Should give an offering to the local deities.

And so revered, they honour him in turn,  
Are gracious to him even as a mother  
Is towards her own, her only son;  
And he who thus enjoys the deities' grace,  
And is by them beloved, good fortune sees.<sup>22</sup>

One could think that this is but one side of the coin, for the Buddha kept on talking about all kinds of heresies. However, if we look up the original, we will find that the word translated as 'heretic' is in Pāli *añña-titthiya* (in Sanskrit, *anya-tīrthika* or *anya-tīrthya*), meaning '[crossing the river of suffering] by another ford'. Thus, the word implies no negativity but just refers to followers of another path. When his last disciple questioned him about other masters, the Buddha refused to evaluate them in any way:

Enough, Subhadda! Let it be as it may, whether all of them have attained realization, as each of them would have it believed, or whether none of them has, or whether some have attained realization and others not.<sup>23</sup>

This generally supportive attitude towards other religions remained the same from the Buddha to the present Dalai Lama. Obviously, in a religion with half a billion followers and 2,500 years of history, exceptions might be found, but the general picture is clear. Sanderson, surveying the early mediaeval evidence in India, concluded: 'Only accounts of religious persecution or killing of non-Buddhists by Buddhists are lacking in the Indian sources known to me'.<sup>24</sup>

There are several explanations for this feature of Buddhism; some of them are mentioned here. (a) Historically, the Buddha was not trying to start a new religion. He only found and taught a new way for those few that seek liberation from the suffering characteristic of human existence, and he said that this goal can be achieved in this life. His path was for monks (i.e., wandering hermits);

---

<sup>22</sup> *Dīgha-Nikāya* 16, 1.31, based on Sister Vajirā – Story (tr.), 1998/2007: 17. I have changed in their translation 'devas' to 'deities' (for Pali *devatā*) and 'He shares his merits with' to 'Should give an offering to' (for Pali *tāsam dakkhiṇam ādise*).

<sup>23</sup> *Dīgha-Nikāya* 16, 5.26, quoted from Sister Vajirā – Story (tr.) 1998/2007: 72.

<sup>24</sup> Sanderson 2015: 213.

he had no particular teaching for the laity,<sup>25</sup> and therefore his teaching was not competing with the religions of the time.<sup>26</sup> (b) The declared aim for every Buddhist monk was to reach *nirvāṇa*, not to change the world or other people. Of course, a pious Buddhist would try to show the way to those interested, but his focus was on self-perfection (i.e., exploring and re-building his own psyche), mostly through meditation. (c) The eightfold path of Buddhism<sup>27</sup> starts with right view (i.e., an intellectual understanding of the Buddha's analysis of the existential situation [not *belief* in Buddhism]), and the second step is the right decision to follow the Buddha's path. Both of them are free, individual mental actions that cannot be forced or urged, only helped. (d) Since the root of suffering is desire and passion, the monk tries to get rid of these. Therefore, the first two commandments of Buddhism are non-aggression and non-possession: an orthodox monk (*bhikṣu*, 'beggar') may not even touch money; he begs for food only.<sup>28</sup>

However, since Jainism prohibits harming any living creature even more strictly, and fans of Hinduism assert that it is an essentially peaceful religion, it may seem that the secret is in the culture of South Asia. We will look at this now.

### 3.2 Inclusivism and gradualism

Our image of India as non-violent and tolerant is to a large extent due to the influence of Gandhi. Yet we must also remember that Gandhi was killed by a Hindu nationalist Brahmin exactly because he tried to oppose violence against Muslims, in an age when communal violence in South Asia claimed many hundreds of thousands of lives. *Ahimsā* (nonviolence) is a central concept of Hinduism; yet Gandhi's favourite scripture, the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, is about the highest god Kṛṣṇa convincing Arjuna to go and fight in the bloodiest war of ancient India, the great war of the *Mahā-Bhārata*.

---

<sup>25</sup> When speaking to laymen, he only urged them to be good citizens conforming to the social norms of the age. In the canonical text considered most important in this regard, the *Sigālaka Sutta* (*Dīgha-Nikāya* 31), the only advice concerning religion is that people should respect and support all kinds of religious specialists, *samaṇas* (non-Hindu holy men), and *brāhmaṇas* (Brahmins, members of the Hindu priestly class).

<sup>26</sup> Of course, this changed when Buddhism gradually developed into a religion. Already with the establishment of monasteries (not more than a century after the founder's death), the need for wealthy support must have engendered some competition with other religions.

<sup>27</sup> The *āryāṣṭaṅgika-mārga*, usually translated as the Noble Eightfold Path.

<sup>28</sup> For a somewhat more detailed account of Buddhism's relation to other religions, see Ruzsa 2018: 347–358.

In spite of these contradictions, there are some grounds to the impression that India is the home of religious tolerance. For thousands of years, different religions lived together in peace and harmony, at least most of the time. The main ideological reason for this is the belief in karma, shared by Buddhists, Jains, and Hindus. According to this belief, a person is reborn according to their merit as a god, animal, or human, and their duty varies according to their birth. Therefore, if they are born as a Christian, their proper duty is to be a good Christian. There is no general law (*dharma*) for everyone—a tiger and a deer naturally follow different rules.

In Hinduism, the logical consequence is drawn: you can be a Hindu only by birth (i.e., you cannot convert to Hinduism). Therefore, it is essentially a non-missionary religion, in spite of some recent phenomena. So it could peacefully coexist since antiquity with Christians, Jews, and later also Muslims in South India—until Islam came as a conqueror and a religious oppressor.

Actually, the most interesting cases of both interreligious conflict and tolerance can be found within the fold of Hinduism. For Hinduism is not a single religion. ‘Hindu’ is a blanket term used by Muslims in India to refer to the followers of any other religion in the subcontinent, and it appears in non-Islamic sources only from the 15th century.<sup>29</sup> Some important Hindu religions are the very conservative polytheistic Brahmanic or Vedic orthopraxy and the main monotheistic religions worshipping Śiva, Viṣṇu, or the Goddess. There was ideological and power rivalry between them, and it is often reflected in mythology, usually in the form of peaceful competition, but not always. A famous myth tells how an ancient god, Dakṣa, did not invite his son-in-law, Śiva, to a grandiose Vedic sacrifice, because he was unclean, wearing a skull. Śiva in his anger destroyed the sacrifice, killing many participating sages and even gods.

Violent conflict between these religions in real life seems to have been infrequent but not entirely absent. From the examples collected by Sanderson,<sup>30</sup> it appears that the followers of Śiva were most inclined to aggressive methods, both against persons and holy places; there are many cases of turning a previous Viṣṇu temple into a shrine of Śiva.

However, the typical picture is astonishingly peaceful. Rulers normally emphasised their religious affiliation, but they not only tolerated but also actively supported other creeds, also financially, excluding only the antinomian religions that practiced, for example, cannibalism or orgiastic rites. We find many temple complexes with temples of the high gods of the different religions side by side, and pious Hindus are normally happy to worship in temples of the other religions.

---

<sup>29</sup> Sanderson 2015: 156, fn. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Sanderson 2015: 208–214.

There are several reasons for this, to us, surprising behaviour. First of all, Hinduism is extremely syncretistic. A follower of Śiva never thinks that Viṣṇu is non-existent or evil: Śiva is God, the Lord (*Īśvara*), while Viṣṇu is a perfectly real and important deity (*deva*), comparable to an archangel for a Catholic, but more independent. Practically all gods, divinities, fairies, spirits, etc. known anywhere in India are accepted as members of a vague and vast mythological space, although many of the old and important gods are reinterpreted as forms or manifestations of one of the greatest gods.

It is clear that this attitude is connected to tolerance, yet it is not the same. This is because it does not relate to the other religion as ‘other’ but rather as a part of the true (my) religion, somewhat misunderstood and overestimated by its followers. In the 1950s, Paul Hacker started to call this particularly Indian phenomenon inclusivism and thought that it is a strange mixture of tolerance and intolerance. ‘In our cultural sphere (*Kulturkreis*) we have no exact equivalent to this inclusivism, and for this very reason we misunderstood it as tolerance’.<sup>31</sup> Hacker, who was also an ecumenical Christian theologian, thought that tolerance is a more advanced concept that classical Hinduism had not reached.

Halbfass, although generally in agreement with Hacker, is on the right track when he suggests that the two concepts do not differ merely in degree. Rather, they belong to somewhat different spheres and therefore do not exclude (but of course also do not imply) one another.

‘Inclusivism’ is not ‘tolerance’. But there can certainly be tolerant behavior and ‘lived tolerance’ on the basis of, or in connection with, ‘inclusivistic’ thought. On the other hand, inclusivistic thought does not by itself exclude intolerant actions. ... Tolerance in this context is certainly a tolerance *sui generis*, but it may still be tolerance. ‘Hierarchical’ or ‘inclusivistic tolerance’ is not a contradiction in terms.<sup>32</sup>

Halbfass duly emphasises that there were genuine cases of tolerance in historical India, for example the rule of Emperor Aśoka (who was, however, a Buddhist) and the ideas of the great 9th century orthodox Hindu philosopher and poet Jayanta Bhaṭṭa. Still he seems to suggest that inclusivism is somehow less valuable than tolerance.

Divergent and foreign forms of religious behavior and orientation, and religious plurality in general, are recognized and tolerated not as legitimate expressions of

---

<sup>31</sup> Hacker 1983: 14 (my translation).

<sup>32</sup> Halbfass 1988: 410–411.



personal choice and human autonomy, but as manifestations of different levels of soteriological development.<sup>33</sup>

‘Different levels of development’ actually seems to refer specifically to gradualism, not inclusivism in general, of which it is the mature, classical form. The two are closely related, yet Hacker, with his typical analytic acumen, distinguished between them. Gradualism is the idea

that there are objective levels of reality and subjective levels of approaching the final reality. ... From about the 14<sup>th</sup> century it became usual in Vedāntism to present all religions and philosophical systems as approximations of truth; but truth itself is represented by Vedāntism. On the lowest level of the scale stands materialism, followed by the different systems of Buddhism, then Jainism. Then the different systems of Hinduism are ordered gradually according to their value.<sup>34</sup>

Actually, the idea is more than a millennium older, going back to early Mahayana Buddhism. First there is the *duplex veritas* that there is a final, highest truth, but below that, the consensual truth is still true in a way. Then the doctrine of skilful means stated that the Buddha taught fairly different doctrines, according to the level of understanding and receptivity of his audiences. Finally, in the *Lotus Sutra* we find clear gradualism with reference to the different Buddhist traditions. In the famous parable of the burning house,<sup>35</sup> a father tries to lure out his children from their house, which is on fire. He promises each the kind of cart he desires (small, middling, or great), although in the end everyone receives the same luxurious ox-cart. (The best and real cart, of course, symbolises the teaching of the *Lotus Sutra*.)

Clearly, inclusivism and gradualism are different from tolerance: they are (formally) descriptive attitudes, stating that another system is a limited part of the true (i.e., our own) view, while tolerance is a normative concept: do not persecute the other. Of course, intolerance is possible also within a tradition (e.g., when some Christians burned others at the stake for their beliefs). Still it is usually directed against the ‘other’, so inclusivism that turns the ‘other’ into an (inferior) part of ‘us’ naturally favours tolerance.

---

<sup>33</sup> Halbfass 1988: 411.

<sup>34</sup> Hacker 1985: 132 and 134 (my translation).

<sup>35</sup> In chapter 3 of the *Lotus Sutra*. For a translation of the Sanskrit text, see Kern 1884: 72–82.

### 3.3 Non-Indian religions

Buddhism may be unique in its perfectly friendly relation to other convictions, but it seems that most religions in the world's history have been closer to it than to Christianity in terms of tolerance. They did not need tolerance, for they were free from the disease to which tolerance is the cure. They never developed the idea that another person or group should be forced to follow their religion.

In a traditional tribal or ethnic religion (Judaism also belongs here), religious identity is determined by birth in the people, and the idea that beliefs or rites could be exported is basically meaningless.

When multi-ethnic political units arose, the possibility for religious rivalry appeared but seldom materialised. Ambitious high priests from time to time tried to influence rulers to support their creeds, not (most of the time) to suppress other beliefs. In most great empires from Persia to China, several great and important religions flourished with only marginal conflict. When a religion was actively persecuted, it was mostly for clear political reasons, as when Christians in 18<sup>th</sup> century Japan were considered agents of European colonisation.

It appears that the idea that other religions should be suppressed is an innovation of the Abrahamic religions only. Probably it arose in Judaism as a response to national catastrophes, especially the Babylonian captivity—it was understood as the punishment of God for disobedience and idolatry. Consequently, religious freedom for the Jews became impossible, for their punitive God would punish the whole nation for the heresy of some. So in this first version followers of other religions were not generally persecuted, only if they belonged to the chosen people.

The compulsoriness of the true religion was inherited by Christianity and Islam, without, however, the ethnic limitation: the Creator of the world is Lord of every human being. Everybody on Earth must be made to worship Him. This singular meme is very virulent when it joins forces with aggressive imperialism. It makes rulers more willing to conquer heathen people and soldiers more determined to fight, and the converted population of the conquered lands will be more loyal to the empire, the protector of faith. And indeed, with the exception of South and East Asia, it has conquered the whole world.

This strong tendency to exclusivity led to intrareligious violence as well. Many more Christians were killed for their faith by other Christians than by all others together, and in the end, this resulted in the invention of tolerance: the ruling elite decided to stop actively persecuting some locally minor Christian communities. The question is: is this the proper mindset to approach other religions in the age of globalisation?

#### 4. Conclusion: beyond tolerance

*Hostilities in this world are  
never stilled by hostility,  
For they are stilled by peacefulness:  
this is a true, eternal law.<sup>36</sup>*

Having surveyed several cases of the peaceful coexistence of religions, we saw that ‘tolerance’ was mostly inadequate to describe the phenomenon. As preliminarily suggested, the reason for this is that the concept is firmly rooted in the history of Christian religion—more particularly, in the thousand-years-old practice of ruthless and bloody suppression of even slightly different versions of the faith.

We could define tolerance as refraining from suppressing the other.<sup>37</sup> This seemingly harmless definition, however, suggests two things: first, that we are unequal in strength, for I could suppress you, and second, that I have some motivation to suppress you, but for some reason (perhaps magnanimity) I stop myself. So tolerance, this seemingly positive attitude, in fact implies inequality and hostility.

Reflecting on this, we may realise that tolerance is miserably inadequate as a ground for interreligious and intercultural dialogue. You ‘tolerate’ what you do not like, what you would like to annihilate, just out of some practical wisdom you restrain yourself. We, however, do not want to be merely ‘tolerated’: we want to be accepted, esteemed, possibly even loved, and the same holds for our partners in the dialogue.

Of course, tolerance is a huge step forward from persecution, suppression, and interreligious conflict. Moreover, it is a very nice personal trait, an aspect of wisdom: it is the ability to subdue the xenophobic animal instinct that tends to interpret any unusual behaviour as dangerous and therefore provoking aggression. However, in intercultural and interreligious dialogue our aim must be set much higher: we should strive for true mutual acceptance, both intellectually and emotionally.

This implies that all parties involved have to give up any sense of superiority. We must not think that our culture is more developed, successful, civilised, natural, or logical, and we must not think that our religion is *the* true one. This is anything but a light demand on the Christian and Muslim participants of the dia-

---

<sup>36</sup> *Dhammapada* 5 (my translation).

<sup>37</sup> Of course, words can and do change their meanings, even in spite of their etymology. Surely many people use ‘tolerance’ in a much more positive sense; still, I feel that in such sensitive matters proper terminology is important. In any case, I am not debating a word but an attitude.

logue. Still, unless we wholeheartedly accept that there are innumerable valid and valuable paths, there will be no real dialogue but only negotiations between diplomats of hostile powers.

This strong kind of religious pluralism may seem a logical impossibility for the exclusivist religions: if Allah is the only god, Kṛṣṇa cannot be another. Now can anybody seriously maintain that the eternal Being has a *real* name, a particular form of air vibration, according to the phonemes of a transitory human tongue, be it Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, or Sanskrit? Pluralism is not a question of logic but of goodwill. The history of religions consists of *both* keeping alive the old faith *and* reinterpreting it. When Jesus said, ‘If there is one of you who has not sinned, let him be the first to throw a stone at her’,<sup>38</sup> he did not revoke the Mosaic Law but rather suggested a (radically) new meaning for it.

So along with the dialogue, we first of all have to work on ourselves. It should be a moral duty for theologians and other interpreters of holy traditions to show that according to their respective religion all creeds (including atheism) can be equally valid and good. It is a general duty to humanity, but more particularly to their own religion—for I think those religions that cannot make this crucial step, insisting on their exclusivity, will become marginalised in the next century or so.

## References

- DeLancey, Scott 2017. ‘Classical Tibetan.’ In: Graham Thurgood, Randy J. LaPolla (eds.) *The Sino-Tibetan languages*. London–New York: Routledge, 369–384.
- Hacker, Paul 1985. ‘Grundlagen des indischen Denkens [Fundamentals of Indian Thought].’ In: Paul Hacker, *Grundlagen indischer Dichtung und indischen Denkens* [Fundamentals of Indian Poetry and Indian Thought] (ed. Klaus Rüping). Wien: Publications of the De Nobili Research Library, 39–141.
- Hacker, Paul 1983. ‘Inklusivismus [Inclusivism].’ In: Gerhardt Oberhammer (ed.) *Inklusivismus: Eine indische Denkform* [Inclusivism: An Indian way of thinking]. Wien: Institut für Indologie der Universität Wien, 11–28. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004645998\\_005](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004645998_005)
- Halbfass, Wilhelm 1988. ‘Inclusivism and Tolerance in the Encounter Between India and the West.’ In: Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An essay in understanding*. Albany: SUNY Press, 403–418.
- Jones, Alexander (ed.) 1968. *The Jerusalem Bible. Reader’s Edition*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Compaaany.
- Kern, Hendrik 1884. *The Saddharma-Puṇḍarika or The Lotus of the Pure Law*. The Sacred Books of the East XXI. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Kroeber, Alfred Louis – Kluckhohn, Clyde 1952. *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*. Cambridge MA: Peabody Museum.
- Putnam, Hilary 1981. *Reason, Truth and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511625398>

---

<sup>38</sup> John 8:7, in *The Jerusalem Bible* 1968.

- Quine, Willard Van Orman 2013. *Word and Object*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Ruzsa Ferenc 2018. 'A buddhizmus és más vallások [Buddhism and other religions].' In: Balázs Déri – Ádám Vér (eds.) *Religio(nes). A vallás és a vallások* [Religio(nes). Religion and the religions.]. HAGION Könyvek 3. Budapest: ELTE BTK Vallástudományi Központ, 347–358.
- Ruzsa Ferenc 2017. 'Sāṃkhya: Dualism without substances.' In: Joerg Tuske (ed.) *Indian Epistemology and Metaphysics*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 153–181.
- Said, Edward W. 2003. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books.
- Sanderson, Alexis 2015. 'Tolerance, Exclusivity, Inclusivity, and Persecution in Indian Religion During the Early Mediaeval Period.' In: John Makinson (ed.) *Honoris Causa: Essays in Honour of Aweek Sarkar*. Allen Lane, 155–224.
- Sapir, Edward 1985. 'The Status of Linguistics as a Science.' In: Edward Sapir, *Selected Writings in Language, Culture and Personality* (ed. David G. Mandelbaum). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 160–166. Originally in *Language*, 5 (1929), 207–214.
- Steever, Sanford B. 2020. 'Introduction to the Dravidian languages.' In: Sanford B. Steever (ed.) *The Dravidian languages*. London–New York: Routledge, 1–44. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315722580-1>
- Sister Vajirā – Story, Francis (tr.) 1998. *Last Days of the Buddha: The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (revised edition). Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, repr. 2007.
- The Jerusalem Bible. Reader's Edition* 1968. Alexander Jones ed. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company.
- Whorf, Benjamin Lee 1956a. 'The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language.' In: Benjamin Lee Whorf: *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* (ed. John B. Carroll). Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 134–159.
- Whorf, Benjamin Lee 1956b. 'Science and linguistics.' In: Benjamin Lee Whorf: *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* (ed. John B. Carroll). Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 207–219.
- Whorf, Benjamin Lee 1956c. 'Languages and logic.' In: Benjamin Lee Whorf: *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* (ed. John B. Carroll). Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 233–245.
- Yue, Anne O. 2017. 'The Sinitic languages: grammar.' In: Graham Thurgood – Randy J. LaPolla (eds.) *The Sino-Tibetan languages*. London–New York: Routledge, 114–163.