

Wonder

Volume: 1 Number: 4 Theme: **Can We Coexist?**

Title: **Orthodoxy, Relativism, and Truth** Author: **Dr. Peter Bouteneff**

This article was originally published as the forward to the book “Seeds of the Word: Orthodox Thinking on Other Religions” by John Garvey. It is republished here with permission and edited for our blog. The full book is available from St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press.

Our’s is an age when people of different faiths are likely to live side by side and have the means of communicating with others all over the globe. At the same time, especially with the rise and spread of terrorism, the faiths do not seem to be talking to each other very well. In many of today’s civil and international wars, as well as in acts of terror on the part of non-national groups, the parties involved accuse the enemy of being godless infidels. In such a climate, dialogue is a critical necessity. When the rhetoric of faith becomes an inflammatory tool, the faiths involved need to begin to talk to one another. Only then, when the “other” becomes a real person, can people begin to stop generalizing and objectifying each other. At this point, they can begin to peel away stereotypes and explore the actual faith that lies behind the polemics. When it comes to dialogue, however, we have to consider very carefully this question: What is it that we are trying to achieve? A common response is to say that we are looking for increased tolerance. But what exactly do we mean by “tolerance?” Some people take it to mean simply peaceful coexistence; others think that it means a compromise of religious convictions. In looking for a viable definition of tolerance, we need to be clear about two distinctions that are commonly overlooked:

§ the difference between tolerance and compromise, and

§ the difference between firm religious belief and religious violence

If we equate tolerance with theological compromise, we will find ourselves falling into one of two camps. One rejects the pursuit of tolerance (and therefore rejects dialogue) because that process would necessarily result in yielding deeply held convictions and betraying one’s faith. Another contingent embraces tolerance as compromise because this affirms their own relativist worldview, where none of the world’s religions can claim the truth for themselves because all are equally true. Both of these options are unacceptable. How do we look at tolerance, then? Inter-religious dialogue is possible for the Orthodox Christian only if tolerance is taken for what it really means: the recognition and respect of the other. We have to believe that it is possible to co-exist with people of other faiths in a relationship of mutual respect and mutual tolerance without either side surrendering its faith convictions. To be tolerant does not mean suggesting that our own faith is wrong or lacking. In short, tolerance and compromise must be dissociated from each other.

The other commonly associated phenomena that must be consciously detached from each other are religious belief and religious violence. In fact, the reason why some people think being tolerant necessitates giving up one’s convictions is precisely because they associate firm conviction with violence. They think that to believe strongly — to see certain truths as absolute

or universal — necessarily means being intolerant (and by extension, violent) toward persons with conflicting convictions. When people consider faith and violence, one word that often comes up is “fundamentalism.” This is a tricky word because it can refer to a specific category of Christian faith that is not by definition fanatical or small minded. But the term is now also commonly used in a pejorative sense, where “fundamentalists” are those who believe that anyone who does not share their faith is damned in the afterlife. This may also carry the assumption that a fundamentalist is ready at any time to resort to violence against people of other faiths. For again, in many people’s minds, violent religious extremism is the natural extension of a firm religious belief that is unthinkingly characterized as “religious fundamentalism.” This trajectory of thought is sometimes further extended: If I believe that the foundational Christian teachings are absolutely true and, therefore, that contradictory teachings are false, this is already an act of violence. Christian apologetics become hate-speech. This logic is highly problematic. Unless we are prepared to distinguish firmly held faith convictions from violent fundamentalism, and unless we dissociate tolerance from compromise, we are destined to choose between two impossibilities: an unacceptable isolationism and an unacceptable relativism. What we are seeking, then, is the place that admits absolute truths and absolute falsehoods, admits belief in the truth (in some cases the exclusive truth) of one’s own convictions, but rejects bringing violence on people because they believe differently. We are also seeking to bring a spirit of creativity, patience and inspired discernment to our speaking as well as to our listening — for dialogue is both.

In his book *Seeds of the Word* Fr. John Garvey seeks to describe just such a place. The kinds of distinctions I have described serve as his point of departure and inform the whole book. But his intention is ultimately practical. Knowing that the best way to begin considering dialogue is by informing ourselves about our dialogue partner, he devotes a substantial portion of his book to an investigation of key beliefs and practices of some of the world’s major faiths. He maintains a clear and sober tone while conveying his intellectual and spiritual inquisitiveness. Fr. Garvey knows that there are a variety of ways and a variety of contexts in which Orthodox Christians have approached other faiths, ranging from missionary to polemical to apologetic. What he is seeking, and what I believe he identifies, is “a consistent Orthodox pattern” in this variegated history. Here are some of the elements of this pattern: The encounter between Orthodoxy and other faiths has a long history. Since its origins Christianity has been an apologetic faith, meaning that it has had to explain itself within a pluralistic and often syncretistic context. The relationship between Christians and Jews, pagans, Gnostics and, later on, Muslims, acquired different characteristics, but each was an interfaith encounter. Today, some of the most important Orthodox interfaith encounters occur in pluralistic settings, such as in the Middle East.

The encounter between Orthodoxy and other faith is, at it best, an informed encounter. The earliest Christians were a minority, living under governments that often persecuted and killed them, which meant that early on, Christians had to learn to give account of themselves and their faith, if not also to persuade. But persuasion, and even self-explanations, entailed knowing the faith and presuppositions of the people being addressed. The encounter between Orthodoxy and other faiths rejects relativism. Orthodox Christians today, as in the past, have found that the most fruitful dialogues happen with partners who have deep and clear faith convictions, hold that absolute truth exists, and agree that some religious teachings are simply wrong. In such an encounter, even as one works creatively to find places of genuine and perhaps unexpected

convergence, it is also necessary to name with precision the points of disagreement, to identify those positions which cannot both be true at the same time. Genuine dialogue cannot occur in a state of denial about real differences. Orthodox Christians admit truth in other faiths. The rejection of relativism does not mean rejecting everything in the other's faith. Indeed, the earliest Christian Apologists taught that the Word (Logos) of God, identified by Christians with Jesus Christ, is accessible in "seed form" in non-Christian and pre-Christian faiths and philosophies. Truth is truth, wherever it is found, and while Orthodox Christianity does claim uniquely to teach the fullness of truth, it does not claim a monopoly on truth.

On that basis, Orthodox Christians are open to mutual learning and mutual transformation. This step may sound radical, but once we admit that truth exists outside our own faith, and especially if we say that everything that is true is true because it reflects Jesus Christ (who is Truth), then we must be open to the ways in which God's truth has been found even in faiths that do not share our belief in Christ. Conversely, even the encounter with different, sometime false doctrines, can shed light on our own teachings and reveal to us new dimensions of their truth. This means that while we must pray that our interfaith encounters result in a godly learning and transformation in the other, we must also pray to be open to the enrichment of our own personal faith and life. Having identified these principles, a further problem comes to mind regarding tolerance in the inter-religious encounter: What is to be done when it is not mutual? It is one thing to work on a proper spirit of tolerance and love on our own part, but what is to be done when that spirit does not appear to be shared? What do we do, for example, with the relative intolerance of non-Muslims in contemporary Islamic states? There is only one answer to this question from a Christian perspective, and it is both a familiar and a hard saying: Our responsibility is to embody Christ's love and compassion, as well as his truth, in all circumstances. The receptivity of the other is not within our control and, in a way, is utterly beside the point. This universal call to exemplify Christian love and truth and to be missionaries in Christ's name will apply differently to different people. It is not up to everyone to engage in interfaith dialogue or even a meaningful interfaith encounter. But the imperative to reflect carefully on other faiths applies to us all — for we do live in a world where terror and intolerance, both across and within religious traditions, are very much on the rise. It is also a world in which God, in the mystery of his will, had evidently allowed a diversity of faiths to develop and flourish. And finally, as Orthodox Christianity make its home in more and more places, situating itself increasingly in pluralistic contexts, it is essential that we consider how we ought to relate (both individually and as a Church) to other faiths and to the people who hold them. May this issue serve as a way into the reflection and as an invitation to go deeper into other faiths, as well as into our own. The two views of religion that seem to prevail in our culture are contradictory. On the one hand, you encounter people who believe that religion is a completely private phenomenon, something like a matter of taste. No religious statement can be considered truer, or closer to the way things really are, than any other religious statement. All religions are equal. Religion becomes a completely subjective thing; you end up "in" one or another religion, or none, depending on how and where you were brought up.

From this relativistic point of view, no one set of values or beliefs can be seen as superior or privileged; there is no such things as "the truth" but rather conditioned points of view. This movement away from the idea that there is such a things as truth, and that it can be truly encountered, has permeated the popular culture. So has the sense that the main value of religion

is therapeutic. It makes you feel better about yourself and provides direction in a confusing, difficult world.

The other prevailing view is broadly termed “fundamentalism.” From this point of view, my religion alone has truth; anything outside my religion is false, even a work of darkness, and if you do not believe the way I believe, you will be damned for all eternity. Religious fundamentalists believe that truth can be found in one particular set of teaching and can be found clearly — it is not so much a question of struggling for clarity as accepting the truth of the given teaching. Furthermore, it is inconceivable that someone who does not hold to the one true religion might still have something to teach us or might still share in God’s truth in a way that is hidden to us.

There are obviously shades of grey in between the views I have presented so simplistically, and few people will fall nearly into one or the other category. There are very sincere fundamentalists who are in practice much more tolerant than they are often seen as being, and some relativists, ironically, are downright fundamentalists in insisting that anyone who does not agree with them is a fool. How does the Orthodox Church regard other religions? That is the question explored in this issue. It must be said that there are a range of approaches among Orthodox Christians. Some may sound almost relativistic; others may deny that truth can be found anywhere outside of the boundaries of the Orthodox Church. What I will try to do here is to show a consistent Orthodox pattern in dealing with other religions, drawing on theology, history and present-day experience.

Orthodoxy had, from the start, dealt with other religions, the first of which were the religions of the world into which it was born: Judaism, which was the earliest Christian context, and the pagan religions and philosophies with which it first had to contend. In confronting these religions, there is an Orthodox tradition that can be traced back to the beginning of the Church’s history, and it engages what might seem two contradictory claims: Orthodoxy insists that the fullness of truth is found in Orthodoxy. The Orthodox Church understands itself to be the Apostolic Church and affirms that no other Church, religion or philosophy can show forth that fullness in quite the same way, or so completely.

At the same time, Orthodox have believed from the earliest years of the Church’s history that God has worked outside the boundaries of the Church and that religious truths have been manifested in other places. In its missionary work, Orthodoxy has at times been able to bless traditions that originated outside of Christianity because they not only did not contradict Christian belief but also in some ways were consistent with it and, therefore, should be received.

The second claim stands to reason, because it is unlikely that God would make the right path so completely obscure that only one tradition could see it at all, and all the others would be completely lost. We often encounter people who reject all religion because religions say so many different and contradictory things, and all claim to be the true way. But these people must not have looked closely at many serious religious traditions because what is more remarkable than their contradictions is their agreements. At the end of *The Abolition of Man*, the great Christian writer C.S. Lewis offers a selection of readings from the number of religious and philosophical traditions, showing how Taoism, Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam and

Greek philosophy agree on many theoretical and spiritual principles. Orthodox Christians take this point seriously and celebrate it. But they do not join with those who say, because of this agreement on so many profound and important points, “All religions are finally the same. We are all climbing the mountain, reaching the same peak by different routes.” This is an attractive idea on its surface, especially in a world which has been torn apart by so many religious wars. But, as we shall see, it ultimately takes none of the great traditions seriously, on their own terms.

The differences matter at least as much as the similarities, and the differences teach and challenge us to understand our own tradition more deeply. The way Buddhists understand the self conflicts with the Christian understanding in interesting and illuminating ways. The horror Jews and Muslims feel at the thought that God, who is Lord of the universe, could have taken on human flesh, becoming “like us in all things but sin,” challenges us to see if we are wrong about this central revelation of Christianity. We might be startled into seeing how radical the claims of Christianity are, which we wouldn’t if we refused to take other religions seriously enough to listen deeply to what they have to say. As we will see, the history of Judaism and Christianity has shown that the Christian tradition can absorb truths from other religions and grow from the contact. So, a dialogue is necessary and can help us to sharpen our appreciation of our own Orthodox heritage. But, we do have to insist on a few things that make some people uncomfortable. We cannot, finally, be relativists. We must affirm that Jesus Christ is the Word of God who became man for the redemption of all human beings. Among some Christians today this truth is sometimes muted, or even denied. Jesus is the way for us, they say, but not necessarily the redemptive truth for Jews, or Buddhists or Muslims; they have their own ways. This is not the Orthodox view.

We have to say that if Jesus was not the redeemer of all human beings, then he redeemed no one. The gospel is for all human beings. It is sometimes said that Orthodox Christians do not proselytize, and if that means that we do not apply coercive pressure on people to join us — that is true — or it should be. But it is our duty as Christians to let others know what we believe to be matter of life or death and leave them free to respond. Here we must take some personal responsibility; it is one thing to preach the gospel, and another to live it. When our lives contradict what we preach, we should not be surprised that those to whom we preach are not impressed by what we say. We do not know, or claim to know, God’s will for those who do not accept the gospel, except to say that God is merciful and loving, drawing all people toward eternal life. We can leave it to God to do that, in God’s own way, but we are obliged to bear witness to the gospel by living it and by preaching it.

In Fr. Garvey’s book he began by looking at several of the world’s great religions, giving them each a chance to speak, and then turning to look at the way the Orthodox Church has historically encountered other religions. He then examines some modern Orthodox approaches to mission work and inter-religious dialogue — especially important since, during the last several centuries, Orthodoxy has moved into the Americas, Africa and Asia, encountering a new religious frontier. Looking also at how other Christians have explored the question of dialogue between major religious traditions, we will then return to the religions we examined in order to look for some of the more relevant and useful points of interfaith discussion.

One final word of caution: Many people who undertake the study of comparative religion find that there is a natural impulse, when you see something that resembles your own belief in another context, to say, “This is what makes us like them, or them like us.” For example, Buddhism speaks often about compassion, and a Christian might be inclined to overvalue this, to see it as more central to Buddhism than it may in fact be. This is not to deny its importance in Buddhism, but it is not as important as the enlightenment that leads to compassion. Similarly, we may be impressed by the Muslim devotion to Jesus, but this is not the Jesus Christians worship. This Jesus is not the incarnate Son of God, he was not crucified for our sins nor does his suffering join with ours. Indeed, the Muslim Jesus was not crucified. The differences between religious traditions are sometimes obvious and sometimes subtle, but they matter deeply. At various point we will not similarities between for example, aspects of Orthodox theology and theologies of other religions, but they are not absolute similarities, and, if taken too quickly to heart, they can be deceiving. As someone said once about the North and South poles, they look the same in some places, but between them is all the difference in the world. We may learn from what Buddhists say about compassion, and we may learn some things we would never otherwise have known. We should be grateful for this, but without too easily equating things that need to be seen discretely and in context.

Dr. Peter Bouteneff is an associate professor of Systematic Theology at St. Vladimir’s Seminary in Yonkers, NY. He holds a D.Phil from Oxford University in theology as well as a Master’s in Divinity from St. Vladimir’s Theological Seminary and a Bachelor’s in Music from the New England Conservatory of Music. He is the author of numerous books and articles, most notably “Sweeter Than Honey: Orthodox Thinking on Dogma and Truth.” He is a member of the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches.

Discussion Questions:

Is there absolute truth? If so, what is it and where does it reside?

Is there truth outside the bounds of the Church? Does the Church have clear boundaries?

Does our faith’s emphasis on being the “true faith” breed fundamentalism? Is it even a claim that our relativist culture has the ears to hear?

Are you open to mutual learning and mutual understanding when you encounter someone of a different faith? Why or why not?