

# CHRIST AMONG THE 'GODS'

Responding to  
Religious  
Plurality Today

Part 2

RESOURCE PAPER 5, 2015



## Contemporary 'tolerance' and the new religion of secularism.

### Introduction: 'tolerance' cannot tolerate Christian claims to uniqueness

Australia is no longer a "Christian" nation. In the first paper in this series, we looked at how Australian society is no longer founded upon values and assumptions founded upon the Biblical message of Christianity. Christianity is no longer 'normal'; religious diversity is the new normal.

'Tolerance' is the common secular approach to religious diversity. We assume that if we learn to 'tolerate' each other's religions, then we can live together in peace and harmony. But this approach only works by redefining both 'tolerance' and 'religion' in ways that do violence to the historical form of most religions – certainly to Christianity.

This new form of 'tolerance' is so subtly woven into the fabric of today's society that it's hard to

pin down. It's more felt than spoken. It's that feeling of a hand on our mouth, silencing us, stopping us from talking about how Jesus claims to be the one, unique way to God. No-one's actually jumped on us and silenced us – it's a vibe. It feels as if making those claims is just ... well... intolerant. In this paper we explain this ironic intolerance of contemporary tolerance.

### Religious plurality will probably lead to some conflict

In our first paper in this series, we overviewed how Australia is becoming an increasingly a multi-faith society. When people of different religions live close together in one society, there's an increased likelihood of conflict between them – not necessarily physical violence, but some degree of friction, of genuine opposition. This is because:



1. Religious identification often lies close to the core of a person's self-identity; and
2. Religions contradict each other.

Australia today is a highly secularised nation. You don't have to be 'religious' to be accepted as a 'good person'.

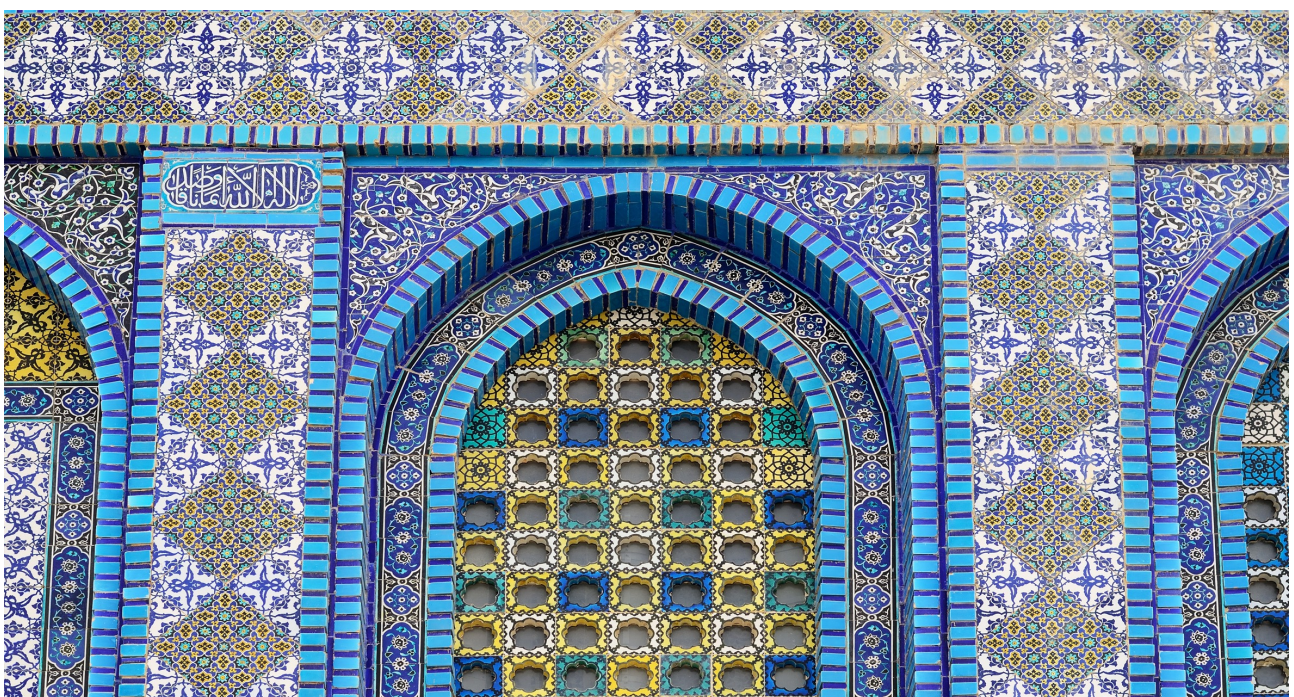
That means that anyone who bothers to identify with a religion – Christianity, or any other – and who regularly practices that religion, is probably fairly serious about it. Their religion will probably be significant to their self-identity; it will lie close to the core of their sense of 'self'. It will play a significant role defining that person's world-view: their sense of meaning and purpose; their understanding of the world, and of their place in the world; and their definitions of truth, goodness, and beauty. Anyone who publicly identifies with a religion will, therefore, probably be emotionally attached to that religion.

This emotional attachment is important when considering the second point about the nature of religions. All the major world religions are, at significant points, not just mutually incompatible but opposed to each other. The statement 'all roads lead to God' is, simply, ignorant and naïve,

because the God/s of the four major religions are fundamentally different to each other.

The Bible says God is Trinity; Jesus is the Son of God incarnate; and he died on the cross to forgive our sins. Christians disagree on how exactly to understand all three – but to actively deny any of them is to put yourself outside Christianity. Islam teaches, amongst other things, that God cannot have a son; that to say God has a son is a sin; that Jesus was a prophet; and that God didn't let him die on the cross, but secretly took him up to heaven. A faithful Muslim would therefore find Christian teaching blasphemous – an offence against the God they worship. And, if their religion is close to the centre of their self-identity, then they will take this divine offence personally. They will be personally upset, because they really truly believe that the God they worship is being misunderstood and insulted.

This kind of conflict is not limited to Christianity and Islam. The Bible says the one God created the whole universe. In contrast Hinduism teaches about many gods ('polytheism'), and also that physical creation is itself an aspect of the divine being. Whereas the Bible says God is passionately concerned about this world – he 'loved' the world in giving Jesus



for us – Buddhism says that passion, ‘love’, is the basis of all our problems. The goal of Buddhism is detachment from the world and absorption into the oneness of everything.

Faithful Christians would find both these views distressing, because, from a Christian perspective, they both misrepresent God. This misrepresentation puts the adherents of those religions under the rightful judgment of the one true God who reveals himself in Christ. The nature of Christian faith motivates faithful Christians to contradict the claims of Buddhism and Hinduism.

Similarly, a faithful Hindu or Buddhist would, quite reasonably, be offended by Christian exclusivism. Both are ancient religions which predate Christianity. Both come from the South Asian Subcontinent, whose rich and ancient culture predates Western imperialism. To a Buddhist or a Hindu, Christianity is synonymous with Western greed and sexual promiscuity. Buddhists and Hindus believe they know how to live properly in accord with the divine; Christianity has no credibility to them.

Of course, personal offence does not always lead to active hatred and violence. It is possible to be offended by someone and simply leave them be. We need to realise, though, that in a religiously plural society, some people are going to believe,

say, and do things that offend others. Under conditions of religious plurality, when cultures collide, there is a high likelihood of some degree of conflict.

### The possibility of conflict makes ‘tolerance’ an important social virtue

In this context of religious and ethnic plurality, ‘tolerance’ has become an important social virtue.

A basic level of tolerance means that physical coercion – especially the use of official state-sanctioned force (police, courts, military) – is not used to make someone comply with your beliefs. A Christian believes Jesus rose from the dead; an atheist believes he did not. The two can argue about it passionately. But neither is going to try and get the other arrested for holding that belief (as the law stands today in Australia).

This basic level of tolerance is compatible with vigorous debate about the truth or falsity of an idea being held. While we permit a person to hold a belief by refusing to use state force against them, we can still think their belief is wrong, and we can still say so publicly.





## Postmodern 'tolerance' demands we 'affirm' all religions

Recently, however, under conditions of postmodernity, the term 'tolerance' has been redefined to mean not just permission, but necessary affirmation of the other person's belief.

This is connected with the postmodern disbelief in objective, accessible, universal truth. Ultimate reality may or may not exist – that's not the point. The point is: postmodernists don't believe that we can find ultimate reality. They don't believe that anyone can confidently say "this is true for everyone everywhere". All we can have is approximations of the truth. And that approximation, say postmodernists, is necessarily coloured and limited by our particular location – our background, ethnicity, gender, and so on.

This does not mean that anyone can believe literally anything they want. That's a caricature of postmodernism. It does mean that no-one is allowed to claim that they have a unique, privileged perspective on reality, which is superior to everyone else's. Such a claim is considered 'intolerant', and is not socially allowed.

Of course, this view of 'truth' cannot comprehend the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. The claim of Christianity is that the eternal Son of God, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, became the man Jesus of Nazareth. If that's true, then the man Jesus, in all his human time-space particularity, is the unique revelation of the eternal, universal God. Postmodernity doesn't engage with the truth or falsity of that claim. It doesn't have to. To claim to have unique access to God is 'intolerant', and as such, postmodernity simply ignores it.

Postmodernism treats religion as a 'cultural' phenomenon. Remember that in postmodern thinking ultimate reality may or may not exist, but all people do have some approximation of



ultimate reality. A postmodern understanding of 'God', or 'the divine', or 'the ultimate' – however him/her/it is named – is part of that approximation. Postmodernism recognises that people are brought up with the religious belief of their culture. Respecting different religious beliefs is, therefore, an aspect of respecting different cultures, nations, and ethnicities. Any claim that Christianity is a superior religion is considered racist. It's like calling someone an 'abo' or 'wog' or 'chink'.

In fact, postmodernity cannot merely permit someone to hold their religious beliefs; it must affirm them, and celebrate those beliefs in them. So someone who says "I don't hate Asians – but I'm not eating in a Chinese restaurant, and I won't send my children to a school with lots of Asians, and I won't employ any in my firm, and..." would be considered racist. These days, the statement "I respect your religious beliefs; you're allowed to hold them; but I think you're badly wrong" comes across sounding the same.



### Postmodern 'tolerance' is actually a new religion

This new, postmodern 'tolerance' is actually a little like a new religion. Postmodernists claim to 'know' that all knowledge is approximate and biased by the person's geographic, cultural and ethnic location – all, that is, except their particular perspective, which they claim to be universally relevant. But how can they know that? They cannot! Not unless they have unique access to a universal, trans-cultural, trans-temporal perspective on the world.

According to postmodernity, this possession of such knowledge is impossible, and intolerant. In this way, postmodernity implodes upon itself.

More importantly, we should recognise that this kind of claim to universal, transcendent knowledge has usually been deemed a religious claim. It's a claim usually made by a prophet one who has knowledge from beyond this world, given by God or the gods. At the very least it's a claim to be 'enlightened', like the Buddha. Secular tolerance is therefore secretly quasi-religious: it makes claims that only make sense theologically, even though it refuses to acknowledge that theological undergirding.

And this brings us to our next point.

### 'Tolerance' does not actually respect religions, but seeks to advance a new religion of secularism

Because it is secretly quasi-religious, this new form of 'tolerance' cannot tolerate other religions – especially monotheistic, missionary religions. It seeks to suppress these religions and replace them with the new religion of secularism.

As we said before, people who are 'faithful', those who are 'committed' to a particular religion, will probably hold their religious convictions close to the core of their identity. Being Christian, Hindu, or Muslim will be important to them. We have also seen that the major world religions contradict each other. Serious adherents of all the major religions will, therefore, sincerely believe that everyone else is objectively wrong. And, out of love and concern for the eternal well-being of those people, they will seek to dissuade them of those wrong beliefs, and inculcate true beliefs about God/the gods/the divine. That is, serious believers, of all religions, will seek to convert others to their own religion. And they will do so out of love: love for their God/gods/the divine, and love for other people.

To the postmodernist, of course, this search for converts is 'intolerant'. The only way 'tolerance' can flourish, according to a postmodernist, is for religious people to stop taking their religion seriously. They don't have to completely stop believing it – but they can't hold it close to their identity; they can't be too passionate about it. And it's best if they stop believing the elements of the religion that make it unique – like the incarnation of Christ, or the uniqueness of Gabriel's communication of the Koran to Mohammed – and only believe the bits that promote tolerance.

In this, postmodernity makes another quasi-religious manoeuvre: it advances the quasi-

religion of secularism. Secularism asserts that life in this world – the ‘secular’ – is more important than eternal life in ‘heaven’, or the ‘next world’. Secularism doesn’t demand that you stop believing in heaven – so it’s not completely atheistic. What’s vital is this: this world must matter more than the next. Respecting people’s religious beliefs – ‘tolerance’ – must, then, be more important than trying to persuade people about your version of God and religion – ‘evangelism’.

But can you see what secularism is doing? It’s making yet another quasi-religious manoeuvre: it’s ‘evangelising’ people with religious beliefs, trying to ‘convert’ them to secularism. Secularism has its own missionary dynamic: it seeks to demoralise all other religious beliefs. ‘Tolerance’ can only make progress by ‘de-converting’ adherents of all other religions.

But in all this secularism overlooks one key fact – and it’s a very simple one. Divine authority



trumps human authority. Regardless of exactly how we understand God/the gods/the divine, he/she/it is more powerful than humanity. That’s part of what makes a God a God – people need to believe that he/she/it is powerful enough to deserve being worshiped and obeyed. And because Divine authority trumps human authority, serious religious adherents will simply ignore secular tolerance and continue their divine mission. Indeed, they interpret secular tolerance as part of the problem which is addressed by their mission. Their converts need to be converted away from, among other things, this form of secular tolerance, and embrace their religious mission instead.

The proper response to ‘tolerance’ is not aggression but a revitalised Christianity

Everyone in Australia has been affected by the quasi-religious claims of ‘tolerance’ and secularism. We can’t completely avoid being influenced by this thinking. If you’re reading this paper, then you probably haven’t been completely de-converted out of Christianity. But we’ve all been demoralised to some extent. We hope this paper has explained how this demoralisation happens. Forewarned is forearmed.

We don’t have to respond to ‘tolerance’ in fear or aggression. What we need to do is to re-engage with the Bible, in its presentation of the gospel of Jesus. That will fan our love for God, and for non-Christians.

So how can we respond in a way that isn’t aggressive-defensive, not get demoralised and silenced by ‘tolerance’, and remain faithful to the gospel of Christ? That’s an important enough question to deserve its own paper – the next and final of this series.





The Gospel, Society and Culture committee aims to provide resources which are faithful to Scripture, relevant to the life and mission of the church, engaged with contemporary Australian culture and informed by careful research. Resource Papers aim to be consistent with the confessional position of the Presbyterian Church of Australia and to reflect positions on

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For more information about The Gospel, Society and Culture committee see [www.gsandc.org.au](http://www.gsandc.org.au).

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