

Contribution Elza Kuyk to the Conference Costly Tolereance, March 2015

Thank you very much for the opportunity to present myself and express my expectations of our conference. I was asked by *Kerk in Actie* in the preparation because of my expertise in ecumenical en and educational work, and for the academic context, for valorisation.

I am involved in the theme of tolerance because of my present job as programme manager for the *Arminius Institute*, a newly established institute related to the Remonstrant Seminary. Presently, I am doing research for a project about the remonstrant contribution to the tolerance debate. It is a prominent theme in their history and self-understanding. The remonstrant church, which carries the name "Remonstrant Brotherhood", presents itself as a church that advocates a free en tolerant christianity.

The Remonstrant Brotherhood dates back to the early 17th century when the theological ideas concerning the predestination of Jacob Arminius were banned by the then reformed mainline church. The Synod of Dordrecht decided in the line of his opponent, Gomarus. But behind that doctrinal conflict there was more at stake.

Ideas about tolerance came up because of all the religious conflicts in this era. In previous centuries, beheadings and all sorts of cruelties between several Christian denominations took the lives of incredibly many people. Experts say: the scale of it was beyond what we see in Syria today. The bloodshed of those days are not part of our present collective memory. It took a lot of time for churches and states, which were in a different constituency at that time - far more intertwined that in present day Europe - to realize that one denomination could not defeat the other permanently. Plurality had to be dealt with somehow. Tolerance was relevant for day to day life in the sense that violence needed to be stopped. But underlying ideas about the free will of the individual, the structuring of power, the dividing of power between developing nation states and a whole lot of christian groups, some of them very radical, was yet to be developed. Remonstrants played a role in that process, politically and theologically. Theologically they played a role in new ways of bible interpretation and a more open mind toward scientific developments than other denominations at that time. Much of that work is now considered part of mainline protestant heritage. The issue of freedom of faith was important from the beginning: there was more room for human autonomy in belief than in the mainline churches of that time. Tolerance was important for the new political relations but also for the community itself: the term brotherhood refers to the term *societas*, and implies tolerance within the faith community. If you want to have freedom of faith for yourself, you allow a similar room for the faith of your fellow christians in the same *societas*. So tolerance is directly linked to freedom of religion. I guess freedom of religion was something that remonstrants helped to develop as a pillar of the developing state, as a condition for all, and also as a freedom for the community itself.

Later on, ideas of the Enlightenment were adapted into remonstrant thinking. Remonstrants made a shift in the 19th century and became what is called a "vrijzinnige kerk"; and liberal does not exactly cover that word. The meaning of tolerance since then was also influenced by that move.

The present situation is that the Remonstrant Brotherhood has about 5000 members. A small church with a declining membership like what we see in other churches in the Netherlands.

The remonstrant church can partly be seen as a sort of asylum-church, a safe haven for those who do not feel free in other churches. The reasons are personal, like bad pastoral experiences. One of these bad experiences could be that people did not feel accepted because of their sexual identity. In the remonstrant church some of them felt welcome, and still do. The remonstrants were the first in the world to bless same sex marriages as from 1986. But of course: when other churches turned out to be more open in this respect, there was less need to turn to the remonstrants.

The remonstrants play only a small role presently in the political field. What they do, they do, and I would say rightly so, in ecumenical cooperation. Tolerance is relevant related to the freedom of faith in the church itself as well, because both a rather traditional protestant wing and a religious humanist wing are to be kept together.

What I learned so far about the history of tolerance in the remonstrant church is how much tolerance is related to the freedom of religion and the freedom (of the individual) in religion. This freedom has relevance for both the faith community itself as for the relation of the faith community with the surrounding world. Tolerance in the present understanding seems to be rather liberal and secular. It is more like a general virtue, an atmosphere of acceptance with a risk of avoiding confrontations and avoiding debate.

If we go back to before the Enlightenment era, we see other aspects of tolerance. They are helpful for a deeper understanding of tolerance. There was much more at stake, just as in the present world of which I expect to hear many testimonies in the presentations in our conference.

Tolerance is a cover of virtues of another kind, relating to matters of spiritual discipline in our respective religions. Whether we are buddhist, jew, muslim, hindu or christian: we are all part of religions which have this tendency to oppose themselves over against the other but also a tendency to exclude their own believers when they do not seem to behave like the dominant group of that faith community. Religions are able to establish peace on the one hand and to stimulate (or legitimate) violence on the other.

I expect our conference to be honest about this unpleasant ambiguity of the very phenomenon of religion. I expect us to refer to our roots and holy scriptures but also see how much violence seems to come from it as well.

We have a whole lot of trouble in finding out how these mechanisms work. I expect this conference to be a passionate exploration of this theme which seems so obvious at first sight but that will bring us to the very heart of what our religious communities are meant to be.

I would say: we are in a common search for the *middle*, which is not the common denominator or a neutral space. We need to search for a balance in between our extremities, a genuine search for what we hope that in our religions and as citizens, we hope to represent: a just, sustainable and loving society.

Elza Kuyk

www.arminiusinstituut.nl