



## **Difficult tolerance: A Ricoeurian account and some practical theological reflections**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this article is to present Ricoeur's view on tolerance, and to reflect on some implications of his view for practical theology in South Africa. I start with a very brief introduction of tolerance as a key principle of liberal democracy and refer to the political use of tolerance in the transition to a democratic South Africa. After clarifying the aims and location of this article, I present Ricoeur's view on tolerance as an ongoing and challenging task for a capable subject. The last section is a brief reflection on some implications of Ricoeur's view of difficult tolerance for practical theology as an academic discipline in (South) Africa. "Tolerance is a tricky subject: too easy or too difficult" (Ricoeur 1996b:1)

### **Key words**

*Tolerance; practical theology; political transition; democratic*

## **1. Introducing tolerance**

Living together peacefully in today's world is a serious challenge. Due to globalisation, the rise of powerful social media, and migration of people, we are much more aware of the "different other": Those who look differently, behave differently, worship differently and live differently. The different other is no longer far away in a distant land, but is here, with us, sharing "our world". The world has become a "global village". Living together peacefully has always been a challenge, as the many religious and cultural wars, colonial invasions and other instances of violence in the past remind us. However, the challenge does seem to have become even more difficult. Xenophobia, racism, right-wing extremism and religious

fundamentalism seem to be on the rise in many parts of the world, with the institution of democracy itself coming under severe attack (Issacharoff 2018).

It is in view of this challenge to live together peacefully that the idea of tolerance becomes important. It goes beyond the scope of this article to try to reconstruct the history of the use of tolerance. We just briefly note here that it was already used in the Middle Ages for dealing with enemies or “bad people (the immoral, the heterodox and the infidel) by those who had the power to dispose of them” (Bejczy 1997:368). The modern liberal political usage of tolerance has its origin in the Enlightenment, especially in the context of the religious-political conflicts in Europe after the Reformation (Forst 2017). The signing of the Peace of Westphalia (1648) is widely regarded as an important historical marker, at least in the Western world. It ended the 80-years religious war and gave a legal basis for religious tolerance (cf. Asch 2000). Secularisation<sup>1</sup> helped to bring religion under the control of politics and contributed to the development of nation states, the advancement of science and new modes of knowledge creation, and new ways of living and working together.

In the centuries that followed, tolerance became a key principle of modern, liberal democracy with its emphasis on human rights. Civil rights that guarantee equality and civil liberties such as freedom of speech and religious freedom imply some form of tolerance regarding differences, whether these are social, political or cultural. Tolerance came to be regarded as an important element in furthering social cohesion in situations of diversity due to this relation with democracy and human rights (Chidester, Dexter & James 2003:5; Gouws 2003). I briefly mention two examples, one global and one local, to highlight the importance attached to the principle of tolerance in recent times.

The importance of the principle of tolerance in modern “Western-style liberal democracy” (Bejan 2018:703) is perhaps best illustrated by the signing of “The Declaration of Principles on Tolerance” by 185 member states of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

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1 Leatt (2017:xi) writes that “secularism is a normative account of the place of religion in society and government and a way of ensuring that religion is held in that place”.

(UNESCO) on 16 November 1995.<sup>2</sup> The declaration describes tolerance as “respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human” (UNESCO 1995, article 1.1). It maintains that tolerance is not only a moral duty, but also as a political and legal requirement (UNESCO 1995, article 1.1). The Declaration further proclaims that tolerance is “a necessity for peace and for the economic and social advancement of all peoples” (UNESCO 1995, preamble) and describes ways to further tolerance, especially through education<sup>3</sup> (UNESCO 1995, article 4).

The second example is from our own South African context. The idea of tolerance, together with democracy and human rights, became part of the rhetoric in South Africa during the transition to a democracy in the 1990s. The Apartheid policy that was still in place at the beginning of this decade was a very violent and intolerant socio-political construction.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore hardly surprising that calls for tolerance were high on the agenda of the political leaders that had to manage South Africa’s difficult transition to democracy. The potential for faction fighting and even civil war loomed large during the early 1990s and the first years of the “new”, democratic South Africa after the 1994 elections. It was a period of intolerance, instability and political violence with high levels of tension and suspicion between the ethnic, social, cultural and political groups of South Africa.

Many of the political and religious leaders of the “new” South Africa – President Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu in particular – embraced the idea of tolerance as part of nation-building and reconciliation. They emphasised the role of tolerance in furthering social cohesion, stressed the importance of unity in diversity (the “rainbow nation”), and challenged South African citizens to accept their differences.<sup>5</sup> President

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2 16 November 1995 was the fiftieth birthday of the United Nations (UN). Since then, 16 November is the annual International Day for Tolerance.

3 Since its establishment after the Second World War, the United Nations has ceaselessly promoted tolerance as a cornerstone of modern democratic societies. UNESCO, the educational and scientific arm of the UN, has many educational programs to promote tolerance.

4 Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu vividly describes the intolerance of the apartheid government against anyone that “dared to criticize their evil policies” (Tutu 1996:203).

5 The word tolerance appears in the first Constitution of democratic South Africa. In a chapter on the State Institutions Supporting Constitutional Democracy (chapter 9),

Mandela referred to tolerance as a gift that we received and that would help us in building a new, peaceful and prosperous South Africa. He often called upon religious organisations, communities and adherents of different faith groups to work towards peace and social cohesion and to further tolerance. Even before his inauguration he stressed the importance of tolerance in a speech at a plenary session of the multi-party negotiations process in Kempton Park:

Together, we can build a society free of violence. We can build a society grounded on friendship and our common humanity – *a society founded on tolerance* (author’s emphasis). That is the only road open to us. It is a road to a glorious future in this beautiful country of ours. Let us join hands and march into the future (Mandela 1993).

## 2. Positioning

Despite all the high expectations for and beautiful things said about tolerance and its necessity in modern liberal democratic societies, the idea and the use of tolerance are controversial (Smit 2017:294–295). Many authors refer to the contested nature and the many inherent paradoxes of tolerance (cf. Forst 2017; Sremac & Ganzevoort 2017:6–7). Others criticise the vagueness and indeterminacy of the concept (Potgieter, Van der Walt & Wolhuter 2014). “Tolerance can be considered as a concept,<sup>6</sup> a disposition, an ethos, an aspiration, an art of titration or delicate balances, a formula for religious or cultural pluralism, a moral virtue, a political principle, a *modus vivendi*. The extensive academic literature on tolerance features all of these approaches to tolerance and more”, writes Brown et al. (2015:160). It goes beyond the scope of this article to give an overview of the different

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it is stated that the functions of the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities are, amongst other things, to “promote and develop peace, friendship, humanity, tolerance and national unity among cultural, religious and linguistic communities, on the basis of equality, non-discrimination and free association” (Constitution 1996, chap. 9, 185.1b)

6 As a concept it meets all the criteria to be regarded as a contested concept (cf. Collier, Hidalgo & Maciuceanu 2006).

academic discourses on tolerance.<sup>7</sup> Instead, I aim to contribute to the discussion on tolerance and intolerance in practical theology by focusing on Ricoeur's account of tolerance. The following questions structure the rest of this article: First, what is Ricoeur's view of tolerance? Second, what can we, as (practical) theologians, learn from Ricoeur's account of tolerance?

The second question assumes that practical theologians are interested in the concept "tolerance". It may not be immediately obvious to the reader why the notion of tolerance is of so much concern to a practical theologian. Is this not a concept that should be left to the philosophers or the political and social scientists? The answer is a definitive "no". Practical theologians are also concerned with the question of how to live together peacefully. The study of tolerance in practical theology is tied to this interest.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the field of study of practical theology is lived religion on an individual, communal, societal and institutional level in all its complexity in modern societies. This inevitably demands attention regarding issues such as diversity, conflict, violence, peacebuilding and reconciliation and also puts the notion of tolerance on the research agenda of practical theologians.

Second, practical theology is not only concerned with the lived religion of the members of specific religious traditions (e.g. specific denominations), but also strives to contribute to just and peaceful societies and the common good.<sup>9</sup> To state it in more concrete terms: Practical theologians in South Africa strive to contribute to a redress of the past, and to build a future for all in this beautiful country. This puts the justice issues (inequality and exploitation) associated with tolerance squarely on the agenda of practical theologians. How do we respond to the many questions regarding economic inequality, unemployment, poverty, the land issue, xenophobia, abortion and same-sex marriages? What are the socio-economic and political conditions for tolerance? What role does religion (religious beliefs

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7 See Brown, Dobbernack, Modood, Newey, March, Tonder & Forst (2015) for a good overview of recent debates about tolerance in political theory.

8 Ganzevoort and Sremac (2017), two prominent practical theologians in the Netherlands, recently published a book "Lived religion and the politics of (in) tolerance" together with practical theologians from many different countries.

9 In recent years, this work is often put under the rubric of public theology or public practical theology.

or convictions) play in this regard? These are all typical questions that a practical theologian may ask.

I trust that I have convinced the reader of the importance of the topic for a practical theologian. There is one last task before I present Ricoeur's view on tolerance. I have to respond to Ricoeur's unsettling question: From where do you speak?<sup>10</sup> The "location" from which I engage with the topic of tolerance is indeed very important. I write this article in a context (South Africa) that has a long history of racial intolerance, tribal intolerance (cf. Baloyi 2018) and gender violence (e.g. Dube 2018). South Africa is one of the most dangerous places to live according to the 2018 Global Peace Index (GPI) with a ranking of 125th from 163 countries (1 = most peaceful; 163 = least peaceful). In sub-Saharan Africa it is ranked 30th out of the 44 countries ranked. The state of peace in this country is indicated as "very low". Besides the huge cost in human lives and the social fabric of the country, violence also has a huge economic cost. The direct and indirect cost of violence is calculated at 24% of South Africa's gross domestic product (GDP). This is the 15th highest spending as a percentage of GDP of the 163 participating countries (Institute for Economics & Peace 2018:93). Although there is no absolute relation between violence and intolerance, it gives an indication of the extent of intolerance and violence in the country. It is thus extremely important to look for ways in which to increase tolerance, decrease violence and to bring order and stability to the country. Practical theologians cannot ignore this, as religious beliefs and practices are often implicated in violent practices or outcomes (e.g. in gender-based violence and homophobic violence). What is the task of a practical theologian in a context of intolerance and violence? How can we contribute to building peace and sustainable communities? We urgently need to reflect on how to deal with the "scourge of violence" and intolerance that is sewn into the fabric of the South African society.

Ricoeur's question can also be read as "from where do *you* speak?" This is equally important, as we have seen in the discussion about the positionality of the researcher. I have to account for my "knowledge interests" to use a term from Habermas (1971). Why am I doing this research? Who benefits

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10 This was the theme of the Stellenbosch conference of the Society for Ricoeur Studies that took place from 23–25 May 2018.

from this research? It is of course impossible to fully account for the author of this article.<sup>11</sup> Suffice to say that I am a Reformed practical theologian trying to engage as best as I can with the challenges of my context while constantly being confronted with my race, gender and privileged status in this country.

### 3. Difficult tolerance: a Ricoeurian account<sup>12</sup>

Tolerance is not a central notion in Ricoeur's work. Browsing through his online bibliography, one discovers that the idea of tolerance hardly features as a topic in his long list of academic books, articles and scholarly papers. He published an article in French in 1988 (Ricoeur 1988) that deals with the topic, but the main work on this topic in English is a volume of articles for the journal *Diogenes*.<sup>13</sup> The English language edition of *Diogenes* was published in book form under the title *Tolerance between intolerance and the intolerable* (Ricoeur 1996a). In the book description, the publisher (Berghahn Books) refers to the fact that Ricoeur gathered many important figures from many parts of the world to reflect on the "obstacles and limits to tolerance".<sup>14</sup>

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11 See Dreyer (2016) for a reflection on positionality.

12 Ricoeur (2004:457–506) ended his book *Memory, History, Forgetting* with an epilogue called "Difficult forgiveness". See Vosloo (2015:366) for a brief discussion on the appropriateness of the term. Due to the hard work that is required to move from passive to active tolerance, or virtuous tolerance (Vainio 2011:283) and parallel with Ricoeur's use of the term "difficult forgiveness", I call this "difficult tolerance". I found a reference to a publication by Zarka (2004) with the title "Difficile tolérance" that uses the same idea (Vainio 2011:283).

13 *Diogenes* is a journal published with the support of UNESCO.

14 The list of authors who contributed to this book is indeed impressive, with people such as Vaclav Havel, Yehudi Menuhin, Hans Küng, Wole Soyinka and Desmond Tutu among the 17 contributors. Ricoeur contributed one chapter in the section "Obstacles and limits to tolerance" (Ricoeur 1996g) as well as the foreword (Ricoeur 1996b) and introductions to the sections "To think tolerance" (Ricoeur 1996c), "Tolerance, rights, and the law" (Ricoeur 1996d), "Some spiritual sources of tolerance" (Ricoeur 1996e) and also to the section "Obstacles and limits to tolerance" (Ricoeur 1996f). The "Declaration of principles of tolerance" of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) is also included at the end of the book. An article by Ricoeur on "Religion and symbolic violence" (Ricoeur 1999) and a chapter on "Religious belief: The difficult path of the religious" (Ricoeur 2010) contain further elaborations of his ideas on tolerance.

Ricoeur sets out his most comprehensive view on tolerance in the article “The erosion of tolerance and the resistance of the intolerable” (Ricoeur 1996g). He starts the article with a profound statement: “Tolerance is the fruit of asceticism in the exercise of power” (Ricoeur 1996g:189). This “asceticism in the exercise of power” implies a renunciation, which Ricoeur describes in terms of five stages. The *first stage* is where you disapprove of something (e.g. someone else’s values or way of living), but you do not have the power to prevent it. You thus have to endure what you disapprove of. The *second stage* also entails disapproval of something, but you try to understand the thing that you disapprove of without agreeing with it. The *third stage* goes beyond the second stage by adding respect for the freedom of others to live their lives as they wish and by recognising this as a right of that person. The *fourth stage* opens the door to the possibility that those who live differently may have an understanding of good that may escape my understanding. I thus do not approve or disapprove of the reasons why you have a different manner of living, and admit the finitude of my understanding. At the *fifth and last stage* I approve of all the different ways that people choose to live their lives on condition that it does not openly harm others. This is a celebration of the diversity of ways in which people live.

Ricoeur (1996g:191) maintains that the transitions between the different stages actually imply a “double ascetism”. It is not only the surrendering of the power to prevent that which you disapprove of, but also surrendering your disapproval. He says that the “mutation of disapproval” already begins at the second stage when an “internal schism” develops between conviction and sympathy, being loyal to your own convictions and imagining a way of life different from your own. The third stage is particularly important, as this is the stage where you assume “a true pluralism of beliefs and of ways of leading life – finally: visions of good ...” (Ricoeur 1996g:192). This does, however, come at the cost not only of an asceticism of power but also of an asceticism of conviction. According to Ricoeur (1996g:194) this creates an almost unbearable schism between truth and justice. To take this step, you have to choose justice above truth as the greater good. You have to concede that the other has an “equal right to mine to live his life as he sees fit”, writes Ricoeur (1996g:192). In doing this, the inequality of the first two stages makes way for reciprocity and recognition.



This “symbolic equalization” (Ricoeur 1996g:193) brings about gains and losses. Among the gains are the civil liberties such as freedom of speech and freedom of association that each one has due to the recognition of equal rights. But there is also a price to pay. In order to achieve this equality of rights, you have to exercise an asceticism of conviction. Ricoeur says this is not only true of individual persons, but also of institutions, in particular religious institutions. These institutions of salvation as he also refers to them, find this price particularly heavy as they have the predisposition to impose their convictions on others. He writes:

For a religious community, whichever one, it is by a permanent work on oneself, from each of its members as well as from its authorities, that can be set down, willingly and kind-heartedly, a limit, not of truth, but of justice, to the public expression of the conviction shared by the ecclesiastical community (Ricoeur 1996g:194).

In order to better understand this asceticism of conviction, we can include at this point ideas on tolerance that he sets out a few years later in an article on religion and symbolic violence (Ricoeur 1999). In this work he still maintains the five stages (here translated as levels), but he lays much more emphasis on the idea of “capacity” and on “capable man”.<sup>15</sup> His reflections in this article are thus more deeply embedded in the philosophical anthropology that he developed in “Oneself as another” (Ricoeur 1992).<sup>16</sup> It is not necessary to give an overview of this article and his complex argumentation regarding the role of the scapegoat in religious violence. However, it is vitally important to see what role capacity, and even more importantly “finite capacity”, play regarding tolerance in the context of religious violence. It is particularly at the fourth level where one’s convictions are challenged, that one recognises:

... a reality which I do not control as my own. I discern at the base of my position a source of inspiration, which exceeds my capacity of reception and comprehension by reason of its demand on thought,

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15 I will henceforth use the gender sensitive constructions “capable human being” or “capable subject”.

16 Ricoeur’s view on the capable human being is rooted in the creation narrative rather than in the fall (creation vs soteriology). This has been a shift in Ricoeur’s own thinking about philosophical anthropology (cf. Van Tongeren 2014:179–181).

its power of practical motivation, and its emotional dynamic (Ricoeur 1999:2).

It is at this point that we discover the limits of our understanding. Ricoeur uses the image of a spring that overflows and a vase that tries to contain it to illustrate our finite capacity “of reception, appropriation, and adaptation” (Ricoeur 1999:3–4). There is a sense of “superabundance” that cannot be contained by the finite capacity of the human being. Religious violence occurs when you try to “force the spring to adapt itself to the dimensions of the vase”, writes Ricoeur (1999:4). It is my interpretation of Ricoeur that it is due to this “constitutive disproportion” between our finite capacity for reception and the superabundance of what is offered to us as human beings (Ricoeur 1999:8) that we could loosen the grip of our convictions and could open the door for the possibility of other truths than my truth. Ricoeur also refers to the importance of a “community of reception” that could broaden our “finite capacity of comprehension” (Ricoeur 1999:9). But even communities have to face the disproportion between “the excess” and their “informed capacity” to receive (Ricoeur 1999:9). The religious person is a capable person, but with finite capacity for reception! We cannot possess the absolute Other (Ricoeur 1999:9–11), nor can any other religious community. We therefore have to limit our claims on truth, whether as individuals or as communities of reception, and this forms the basis for an asceticism of conviction.

The fourth stage goes beyond the “polemical version of tolerance” of the third stage in order to finally reach a form of “conflictual consensus” (Ricoeur 1996g:194). Ricoeur says that you cross a very important limit (a “critical threshold”) at this stage. Although it seems as if tolerance is reaching its “culminating point”, it may actually already begin the descent on the slippery road towards indifference.<sup>17</sup> The “mutation of disapproval” now reaches the point where you neither approve nor disapprove. This, however, implies that you do not have a monopoly on truth and that there is truth other than my truth. “If I am capable of this step, I will have converted tolerance from the passive to the active, from the enduring to the accepting”, writes Ricoeur (1996g:195).

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17 De Wit (2016:692) refers to Ricoeur's “tolerance curve”.

Although stage four seems to be the ideal stage, Ricoeur warns that this stage contains some dangers. It could lead to elitism and to a divide between the citizens of stage three and the sages of stage four. The public virtues of stage three could become disengaged from the private virtues of stage four. This movement away from the public to the private is just one step away from indifference, where you “approve of everything, because everything is the same” (Ricoeur 1996g:196). According to Ricoeur this is where the so-called postmodern, Western society is today. There are “no longer professions of faith to reconcile and first to constrain to cohabit” (Ricoeur 1996g:196). We have stopped the struggle for tolerance, the difficult work of asceticism of power and of conviction, and have become indifferent – indifferent to differences and the different other.

This leads to another problem of tolerance. If we tolerate everything, we may also tolerate the intolerable, namely that “what we would not want to tolerate, even though we could or even should”, writes Ricoeur (1996g:197). And this leads to other problems. What do we regard as intolerable? How do we recognise the intolerable? The key here, according to Ricoeur, is when we experience indignation or moral anger. It is then that we come face to face with the intolerable. Indignation is the “last bastion of a common morality in ruins” (Ricoeur 1996g:199). However, our experiences of indignation may differ as evil takes on many different faces. Ricoeur (1996g:198) therefore introduces the notion of *harm*. We have to be morally vigilant when harm is at stake, especially when there is a possibility of harm to those who are vulnerable. We cannot be indifferent towards the fragile, those who are particularly vulnerable to harm.

If then it were possible to recognize in indignation, an eminently reactive feeling, a positive motivation, it would be the responsibility with regard to the fragile in its multiple forms, deploying itself on the horizon of the planetary environment (Ricoeur 1996g:199).

What motivates us to care for the vulnerable and to “denounce the intolerable” (Ricoeur 1996g:200)? Ricoeur refers here to a “return to the forgotten roots of our culture”, in the case of the West, the encounter between Greek-Roman and Jewish-Christian heritages, the Renaissances, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the national and socialist movements of the 19th century and so forth. According to Ricoeur, it is in our traditions

that we will find the will to live together, because these traditions are all “cofounders of a same will to live together” (Ricoeur 1996g:200).

Despite the optimism that Ricoeur expresses towards our capacity for indignation and for rediscovering the will to live together from our cultural roots, he warns that indignation can easily lead to new forms of intolerance when “indignation invites repressive behaviors” (Ricoeur 1996g:200). In order to prevent this return of intolerance in the name of indignation, we need “level-headedness”:

Level-headedness, as its name indicates, weighs the for and against of an unlimited tolerance which risks letting wrong be done to the most fragile in the name of liberty and risks a return to intolerance under the cover of moral order (Ricoeur 1996g:201).

Level-headedness is thus a way to set limits on indignation and the rage that accompanies it. It is a form of *phronesis* or practical wisdom in action (Ricoeur 1996g:200–201). According to Ricoeur, this level-headedness is demonstrated in modern, pluralist societies in at least two ways. First, through searching for “fragile compromises” rather than moral consensus as the last is no longer possible in pluralist societies. Second, by not forcing premature conclusions where there are strong differences of opinion. Ricoeur (1996g:201) mentions here as examples life and death issues such as abortion and euthanasia where it is difficult to reach moral consensus and where the relation between private and public morality is particular problematic. To conclude: active tolerance is work, very difficult work indeed.

#### 4. Practical theological reflections

What can we learn from Ricoeur’s account of “difficult tolerance”? Before turning to my subject area (public/practical theology), I want to make a few general comments on Ricoeur’s view of tolerance. First, I think we have to read his views on tolerance against the backdrop of his bigger project, namely to develop a philosophical anthropology of the capable human being. The capacity for tolerance is one of many capacities that has to be developed and should not be seen in isolation. Although Ricoeur does not do so, I think we can include this capacity for virtuous tolerance in his

vision of a new ethos for human relations in the midst of diversity and pluralism and his views on hospitality, the exchange of memories and forgiveness (cf. Ricoeur 1996h). Cultivating the virtue of tolerance with its asceticism of power and conviction will then have to be read together with the tasks of translation, crossed narration and mutual compassion that are required from all Christian denominations (Ricoeur 1996h:12). It is hardly conceivable that the task of translation will commence without some form of active tolerance and a willingness to engage with the other.

Second, we have to keep in mind the “little ethics” (Ricoeur 1992:290) that Ricoeur developed in “Oneself as another” (OaA) when we read his work on tolerance. The capacity of capable subjects to tolerate forms in my view part of the “ethical intention” of “*aiming at the ‘good life’ with and for others, in just institutions* (original emphasis)” (Ricoeur 1992:172). It will be interesting to explore, for example, the relations of the capacity for tolerance with ethical ideals such as self-esteem, solicitude and practical wisdom. These capacities are also not only developed just for oneself, but for the good life with and for others in just institutions. The “little ethics” could thus provide a framework for dealing with the issues of justice (the self and the moral norm - chapter eight of OaA) and truth (the self and practical wisdom - chapter nine of OaA) that are so important in cultivating the virtue of tolerance. Stated differently, cultivating tolerance could be seen as a part of Ricoeur’s broader project of describing the ethical intention.

Third, Ricoeur chooses to focus on the individual (and to a lesser extent the community) in his account of tolerance. This is an important choice. The UNESCO Declaration of Principles on Tolerance (UNESCO 1995) that we mentioned above, distinguishes between tolerance exercised by individuals, groups and states. Much of the discussions, especially in the field of political science, deals with tolerance at state level where the focus is on judicial and administrative processes. It is at this level where we also find much of the critique of the dominant paradigm of liberal tolerance. The publications of Brown (2006) and Žižek (2008) are excellent examples of the critique of the ideological use of liberal tolerance for state purposes and the universalising of “Western-style” liberal democracy. These discussions are also of huge interest for practical and public theologians due to their interest in civil and state institutions. This is, however, not the primary location of Ricoeur’s discussion of tolerance. He primarily focuses

on the individual and social dimensions of tolerance.<sup>18</sup> This does not mean that the institutional and/or state levels are unimportant. The legal and institutional structures and policies define the parameters within which the discussions take place, and these arrangements must therefore also be carefully scrutinised. But this is not the major focus of Ricoeur's work on tolerance.

What can practical theologians learn from the brief description of Ricoeur's account of tolerance? I briefly mention a few key points. First, Ricoeur (1996g:189) views tolerance as a virtue: "It is a virtue. An individual virtue, and a collective virtue." Ricoeur does not offer a virtue ethical theory,<sup>19</sup> but virtues and the cultivation of virtues by capable subjects do play an important role in his work. Tolerance is one of these virtues that must be developed as part of the will to live together. This focus on the moral agent and his or her capacity to develop the virtue of tolerance may make practical theologians working in the Reformed tradition uneasy due to the perceived dangers of perfectionism and work righteousness (Vosloo 1997:301). However, there seems to be a greater openness to virtue theories and virtue ethics in recent years. This has important implications for moral formation on an individual and communal level. Many religious education scholars have also in recent years worked on citizenship education programmes to cultivate civic virtues such as tolerance (cf. Willems, Denessen, Hermans & Vermeer 2010). Ricoeur's moral and ethical theory and his work on tolerance provides theoretical support for these efforts.

Second, I think Ricoeur's exposition of the five stages or levels of tolerance helps us to think in more nuanced ways about tolerance and to recognise the work that is involved when one crosses the threshold from passive to active tolerance. It also helps us to recognise the different challenges or problems

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18 I have not explored the suitability of Ricoeur's ethical theory for the (South) African context. This is an important task that still lies ahead. See Metz (2014) for a thought-provoking discussion on the virtues of African ethics. It is interesting to note that Mazrui (2009:36–37) describes tolerance as the first of seven pillars of wisdom for a new global ethic.

19 "Because virtues make up a part of his normative theory, Ricoeur may thus be considered a virtue theorist, but he may not be considered a virtue ethicist insofar as he maintains that virtues are insufficient on their own to address moral questions. In particular, questions concerning what one ought to do, for example, whether I owe people half a world away anything, are for Ricoeur best addressed by his own version of deontology" (Purcell 2015:227).

at the different stages. Practical theologians and religious educationists may find these insights useful when dealing with moral formation, socialisation and the cultivation of civic virtues (cf. Potgieter, Van der Walt & Wolhuter 2014). It is interesting to note that one of the main recommendations of the large REDCo (Religion in Education: Contribution to Dialogue) research project was that “(an) education policy development and implementation need to focus on the transformation of abstract (passive) tolerance into practical (active) tolerance” (Weisse 2011:121).

A third point is that Ricoeur helps us to reflect on the challenge of taking our convictions in the public sphere. With religious intolerance on the rise (Volf 2015:97–103), it is important for practical theologians to research how and why religious people bring their convictions into play in the public sphere. Besides the descriptive-empirical and interpretive tasks (where Ricoeur’s insights could also be helpful), it is especially regarding the normative task (Osmer 2008:129–173) that his insights could be useful. Ricoeur’s view on tolerance, and specifically the way in which he approaches the issue of truth and convictions,<sup>20</sup> could also be helpful in formulating models of good practice.

Fourth, Ricoeur’s view on tolerance helps us to see the limits of tolerance more clearly. Tolerance requires a great sensitivity to the misuse of tolerance through indifference.<sup>21</sup> Active tolerance requires a great sensitivity for injustice. We have to learn to *see* the injustices to and suffering of others (Smit 2003). This is particularly important in the South African context where an emphasis on tolerance can be used to mask “appalling political realities” (Wolf, Moore & Marcuse 1965:vi). Moral indignation, moral anger and a sensitivity to any kind of harm could help prevent that tolerance turns into repressive tolerance (Marcuse 1965).

It is interesting to note here that Albert Nolan (1992) already voiced this concern in the transitional period in South Africa in the early 1990s. Commenting on a conference on democracy organised by the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA), Nolan says that he was struck by the emphasis on tolerance as the main element in ensuring a successful

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20 See also Volf (2015:137–160) for an insightful discussion on religious exclusivism and political pluralism.

21 Leonardo Boff (2011:163–164) also adds cowardice and convenience to the list.

democracy. He writes that everybody seemed to be bothered by the levels of intolerance and the urgent need to get people educated: “Speaker after speaker referred to the perceived high levels of intolerance in South Africa and to the urgent need to educate people in the virtues of tolerance ...” (Nolan 1992:12). This was in stark contrast to a conference of the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT) where the issue of tolerance did not even feature. The main talking points at the ICT conference were the economic inequalities in the country that need to be redressed, the dismantling of dominant powers and the redistribution of power. Nolan’s conclusion was that these different views on the urgent things to be done in the country indicated two different responses to the intolerance of apartheid. Those in power seemed to use the call for tolerance as a way to keep the power structures intact and to pacify the disenfranchised.

Lastly, Ricoeur’s emphasis on practical wisdom is very important for practical theologians with their concern about theories for practice and implementation strategies. Ricoeur reminds us that the exercise of tolerance requires wisdom and “level-headedness”. He mentions two practical examples, namely a willingness to make “fragile compromises” rather than to search for moral consensus and to avoid coming to premature conclusions on issues that are divisive. These strategies could help to defuse many conflicts regarding religious matters and to further tolerance in situations of great religious diversity. The notion of practical wisdom could also inform our practical theological theories on leadership and our practices of training religious and community leaders.

## **5. Conclusion**

We mentioned Ricoeur’s warning at the beginning of the article, namely that tolerance is a “tricky subject: too easy or too difficult” (Ricoeur 1996b:1). Tolerance is always caught in the tension between intolerance and the intolerable (Ricoeur 1996). Active tolerance is demanding work. Where do we get the motivation for this? Ricoeur answers that it is in our traditions that we will find the will to live together. Pope Francis certainly agrees with this view. I conclude with his words of wisdom from our Christian heritage to participants at the world conference on “Xenophobia, racism and populist nationalism in the context of global migration”:



(T) he other is not only a being to be respected by virtue of his or her inherent dignity but above all a brother or sister to be loved. In Christ, tolerance is transformed into fraternal love, into tenderness and active solidarity. This applies above all in regard to the least of our brothers and sisters, among whom we can recognize the stranger, the foreigner with whom Jesus identified himself. On the Day of Judgment, the Lord will recall “I was a stranger and you did not welcome me” (Mt 25:43). But today too he asks us: “I am a foreigner, do you not recognize me?” (Francis 2018).

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