The problem that I intend to try to tackle in this brief intervention of mine is the following: is the current notion of religious freedom or freedom of conscience – I do not mean to distinguish the two things even though one probably should – compatible with the current notion of tolerance? I will briefly try to prove: 1. that this problem exists, 2. that the setting given by Baroncelli to the problem of tolerance is the only way, at least among those I know, to set it correctly.

In the abstract, of course, the two concepts seem to fit together perfectly, after all they were almost always compatible in the internal forum (with the exception of the Catholic inquisition, as far as I know). If, however, we are striving to understand as we are trying to do today, the problem emerges immediately: it happens in fact that often the two concepts will involve, consciously or not, two opposing rhetorics, of inclusion and exclusion, often and willingly at the same time. On the other hand, from a public point of view the principle of religious freedom implies a form of public ignorance (even if almost always this is only very relatively true) with regard to the contents of this freedom; on the other hand, every religious freedom in which it is exercised implies a radical exclusivism: one cannot convert simultaneously to Christianity or Islam or practice different rites at the same time.

The same thing naturally applies to political liberty, but in this case, it is normally stated that the exercise of the aforementioned freedom is subordinated to the acceptance of a set of common values - constitutional principles – and of common rules within which only political freedom is exercisable. This is because political confrontation exists in function of the exercise of a political power: everyone can disagree with any political proposal but must obey it when it turns into law correctly through a series of constitutionally guaranteed procedures. Every discussion or political confrontation is aimed at the conquest of a political monopoly. The purpose of constitutions, or at least of liberal constitutions, is to limit this monopoly to allow the survival of an adequate political dialectic through the protection of oppositions.

The problem lies in the fact that, unlike the political one, religious freedom implies the recognition of a right to a series of external and therefore public behaviours that by definition cannot be compulsively transformed into obligatory behaviours for all, under penalty of the abolition of religious freedom itself as external freedom. A quick examination of Hobbes *Leviathan* or of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologicus Politicus* – from my point of view

the two paradigmatic texts of modernity – would be sufficient to detect the dramatic centrality of the problem: on the one hand both Hobbes and Spinoza admit and defend the freedom of conscience in internal forum, on the other hand they affirm at the same time the right of the sovereign in power to establish common dogmas and common rituals mandatory from a public point of view.[1] Locke's 'tolerance' has – on the other hand within very clear limits – fortunately amended, not completely erased, from the paradigm of modernity this scheme, but the problem remains and is destined to emerge periodically in particular situations.[2]

In a certain sense it could be argued that, at least after Locke, religious freedom could be assimilated more to economic freedom than to political freedom:[3] not surprisingly we hear about a religious market and about religious demands to which religions offer religious supplies and even about a supermarket of the Sacred. That captures something essential that adequately describes the behaviour of many churches and sects within the modern open society.[4] The analogy, however, cannot be perfect because the goods put up – please allow my coarseness – for sale by the various religious denominations are *metaphysical* as Stark has often pointed out; in other words, while in theory it would always be possible to check the efficiency of any goods put up for sale obviously in relation to their price – and consumer companies take on this function primarily – there is no metaphysical body that can control the qualities of the goods of 'salvation' put up for sale. In other words, the verification can only be internal. Religions are ultimately self-referential realities, even when they are in competition with one another.

The tools through which a hypothetical religious market can function may be, given the aforementioned self-reference, only two: fusion-syncretism and the transition from one perspective to another e.g. conversion. These two elements can be set against each other but are also strongly complementary to each other.[5] Here, with the help of William James, I will only deal with 'conversion'.

What does being reborn mean?

As is well known, William James distinguished religious experiences into two categories: the

religions of the healthy self and those of the sick self. Men, claimed James, on the basis of a statement by Francis William Newman,[6] the much lesser-known brother of the well-known cardinal, are divided into two basic categories, those who are content to be born once and those who want to be born twice. The former are in turn divided into two categories. Those who are naturally and instinctively happy with their state, who instinctively rejoice in the fullness of life that flows around them and those for whom optimism is a moral duty – in this regard the model is the hated-loved Ralph Waldo Emerson. The experience of conversion is irretrievably precluded to them: they are too healthy or at least they would like to be so too strongly and energetically. On the other hand, the experience of conversion concerns the second type of men because it implies a leap from a state of melancholy to one of exaltation. The religions of conversion are the most complete for James, although less widespread. Obviously, even if James does not take the trouble to highlight it, they are all of a biblical matrix, with the unique although an extremely important exception of Buddhism.

What does distinguish these two types? James uses two technical terms in this regard: the first is *threshold*, the second is *field of consciousness* which is characterised by the indetermination of the margin; conversion is caused by *the presence of an active subliminal self*.

1) by 'threshold' James means a limit point that varies from individual to individual, and that can also vary within the consciousness of a single individual at different times, warning of the *malum mundi*.

2) in order to be converted a man must not only have a very or relatively low 'threshold' with regard to the *malum mundi* – or suffer as Job's particularly tragic life experiences – but have a 'second self' available in the unconscious but not present on a conscious level.These two conditions must naturally be equally present. A man could have a very rich unconscious life but a very low threshold, or vice versa feel the *malum mundi* in a particularly tragic way but have no other 'self' in reserve, able to emerge or re-emerge at a decisive moment and therefore be completely devoid of 'mythopoietic' imagination.

It is therefore evident that the truly religious individuals are, have been and always will be very few: men, said James with an expression destined to become a common place, are divided into those that have their own religion and those that have the religion of someone

else – the majority. One of the effects of secularisation is probably the, at least apparent, disappearance of this majority.

Given the theme of this conference, I will not critically address this approach, which I reserve the right to resume at the conclusion, but I will only briefly examine a passage that James uses to present the subject of his lectures to his Scottish listeners, perhaps to shock them enough to make them pay attention to his speech. This is a passage taken from the Journal of George Fox, notoriously the founder of the most open, reasonable and tolerant religious sect born of the reform. Here is the passage:

as I was walking with several friends I lifted up my head, and saw three steepled-hauses spires, and they struck at my life. I asked them what place that was? They said, Lichfield. Immediately the word of the Lord came to me, that I must go thither. Being come to the house we were going to […] I stept away […] till I came within a mile of Lichfield, where, in a great field, shepherds were keeping their sheep. Then I was commanded by the Lord to pull off my shoes. I stood still, for it was winter, and the word of the Lord was like a fire in me. So I put of my shoes, and left them with the shepherds; and the poor shepherds trembled, and were astonished […] and as soon as I was got within the city, the word of the Lord came to me again saying; Cry, 'Wo to the bloody city of Lichfield!' So I went up and down the streets, crying with a loud voice, WO TO THE BLOODY CITY OF LICHFIELD! It being a market day. […] And no one laid hands on me. As I went thus crying through the streets, there seemed to me to be a channel of blood running down the streets, and the market-place appeared like a pool of blood. When I have declared what was upon me, and felt myself clear, I went out of the town in peace, and returning to the shepherds gave them some money, and took my shoes of them again. But the fire of the Lord was so in my feet, and all over me, that I did not matter to put on my shoes again, and was at a stand whether I should or not, till I felt freedom from the lord so to do: then, after I washed my feet, I put on my shoes again.[7]

To be noted that James had already taken steps to inform his listeners of the *psychopath or détraqué* nature of George Fox, and it is no coincidence that the passage is quoted in his first lecture entitled *Religion and Neurology*.

However, the interest in the passage resides not in the more or less pathological state that

the passage testifies to. In a certain sense one could say that not only James and his learned listeners, but Fox himself was well aware of it, so much so that the passage goes on to tell how Fox himself strove, through the elaboration of a series of ad hoc hypotheses, to construct an *a posteriori* rationalisation of this embarrassing *word of the Lord*, which in its immediate meaning seemed senseless to him too: for what reason in fact would the quiet town of Lichfield have been a bloody city? Instead, I would like to focus on one central point of this narrative: George Fox emerges from the common universe of all men, and first of all pastors who are surprised and frightened by this, for an explicit divine command to take off his shoes, and return, always for another explicit divine command, putting them back on. It should be noted that if there had been a particularly heinous crime in Lichfield a few days earlier, even unbeknownst to George Fox, an essential element, a verifiable 'fact', would act as a *trait d'union* between the two planes of the discourse that would be appearing overall sensible even though he would have remained 'foolish' to George Fox, who knew nothing about it.

There is another interesting point in this narrative: George Fox is surprised that none of the peaceful citizens of Lichfield have beaten him up. If they had done, he probably would have understood and apologised – 'forgive them Lord for they do not know what they do' as per the Evangelical citation. This could mean that the peaceful citizens of Lichfield, unlike those of Jonah's Nineveh, had accepted Fox's behaviour in complete indifference. But I will return to this point at the end of my paper. The passage quoted has the merit of presenting the problem that interests me in a particularly radical way: there are two George Foxes, and above all two different levels of communication, the pathology of the situation has to do only with the fact that these two levels of communication they have no point in common and that therefore the self-referentiality of George Fox's speech without shoes is total, while in almost all 'normal' religious discourses there is still a margin of common meanings that can be more or less broad – think for instance of the five ways of Thomas.

At this point let us try to rethink the notion of conversion set out above: it is clear that the concept of 'threshold' becomes central. Let us imagine making this aspect of the question clear that a 'vegan' of our days was miraculously present in Lichfield, or more precisely still in its bloody meat market that certainly George Fox must have gone through during his preaching. He would have found Fox's invective to be perfectly sensible, indeed he would have found it even more sensible than Fox himself, who, as I have already mentioned, had to

construct a complicated attempt at rationalisation afterwards, going back to the time of the Roman occupation. The example, however absurd it may be, allows us to understand the deep connection that links the two essential conditions of James: I do not think the horror of blood is a natural fact, since after all man has been an animal hunter since prehistoric times; but it is probable that it has characterised many human individuals throughout the history of our species, so much so that it has always been exorcised in many ways since prehistoric times. To produce a religion such as Jainism, it is necessary that in some individuals a very low threshold for horror for this practice is combined with the emergence from the unconscious of a positive feeling towards every living being. An original James-type of religious experience, and a subsequent mythical transcription of it, was probably essential both to become hunters and to become vegans.[8] An individual, one could conclude, is first and foremost his mythopoeic imagination, and the recognition of religious freedom is precisely for this essential.

Flavio Baroncelli and the virtue of indifference

At this point we are almost back to the starting point: how to reconcile the claim of universality of every serious religious discourse with its self-referentiality in external forum? Avoiding both the Talibanism of all the prophets and the inverse Talibanism of all the contemporary *atheologists* who think of the "religious" as, in the best case, sick to cure, with a very early scientific education.[9]

Probably the best solution remains the small one practised by the peaceful citizens of Lichfield. The virtue of indifference for which they avoided beating up poor George Fox. What is often missed is an adequate theoretical justification for this fact, which did not coincide with prudential arguments – repression would have too high a social cost – or a merciful one – we must tolerate wanderers to give them time to find the truth – or again of a sociological or pseudo-sociological nature – it is a question of residual behaviour destined to be absorbed with the progress of civilisation, or in any case of true religion.

Particularly significant was a theory, different, and in some way opposite and morally more demanding, that was fashionable about thirty years ago, supported by an illustrious

Argentine professor, Ernesto Garzon Valdès, who was also a visiting professor in Genoa in those years.[10] Tolerance is a particularly worthy virtue because it forces us to bear the unbearable. The starting point of the article is a story of Manuel Vincent ten years before in which he told of a father willing to tolerate the asocial and rude behaviour of his daughter and her friends until the fateful date of 14th May 1980, when she tried to put her filthy hands on his Mozart to make her friends listen to him. Another important point of reference is an analogous position of Mary Warnock[11], inherent as well *prima facie*to the complex mother-child relationships. From these two particularly significant *exempla* Valdès drew an essential conclusion:

in both cases tolerance appears as a dispositional property which in different and repeated circumstances […] is tested. Common to all these circumstances is the rejection that the respective acts immediately arouse in the tolerant person.[12]

The inevitable consequences of this approach are the affirmation that *the idea of tolerance is always accompanied by the idea of an evil* which should be the object of tolerance itself and therefore the need for a judgment weighed between the evil to be tolerated and the evil of intolerance; secondly *the weighting presupposed by tolerance and a good criterion to distinguish this from indifference*. It was therefore a matter of finding a new Aristotelian *medium* between the opposing vices of intolerance and indifference.

It was a version of the virtue of tolerance that was particularly demanding and ascetic in that it imposed the tolerance of the intolerable through a form of castration – even if this term was not used – of our moral or simply aesthetic instinct which should have involved suffering and therefore a complacency of this suffering.

The merit of Flavio Baroncelli was to react to this approach through the elaboration of an alternative hypothesis – the development of which probably would have led to the defence of political correctness in *Viaggio al termine degli Stati Uniti* and lastly to *Il razzismo è una gaffe* – tolerance is a public virtue that concerns the public space where differences must not be seen or at least noticed even if they are accidentally glimpsed. It is therefore a question of building institutions – and in the broadest sense of the term, even language is an institution, or rather the first institution – that are tolerant, not castrations of our private preferences whose public manifestation becomes a blunder. In this decidedly non-

Aristotelian perspective, indifference becomes a public virtue that should not necessarily imply the castration of our private preferences, but if ever their "relativisation" in public space. An intolerant person would become essentially a *blunderer*, ridiculous not only in front of others, but above all in front of himself.

Only within a framework of this kind can the right to religious freedom in the external forum find its place through the construction of a public space within which, like within a Goffmann-style 'scenario', behaviours of religious actors can move. This would imply the need to postulate more alternative, parallel but not necessarily self-excluding public spaces.

The difficulty will then be again in the exercise of what Walzer called the 'art of separation' proper to liberalism, the exercise of which is particularly complex and difficult, especially since the World Wide Web seems to have erased the distinction between 'public' and 'private'. I fear it will fall back more and more on the ordinary magistracy. In a certain sense we could say that the need to re-delineate this essential distinction is the difficult task that Baroncelli has left us with.

Endnotes & references

[1] From this point of view, the *credo minimum*represents a weak attempt to find a balance between the internal and the external, public and private. In this regard I refer to my '*Dual language*': '*Le salut des ignorants*' and the '*Homo liber*'.The paradoxes of the '*credo minimum*' according to Spinoza in '*La ragione della parola*'. *Religione ermeneutica e linguaggio* in *Baruch Spinoza*, edited by F. Camera and A. Sangiacomo, II prato, Saonara (PD). 2013, pp. 97-130.

[2] See for instance the problem of the Burka.

[3] In this regard I refer to the *General theory of religion*which Rodney Stark, with the help of William Sims Bainbridge, expounded in the ever valid *A Theory of Religion*(1st ed. Lang, New York 1987).

[4] But not in Europe, considering that in all European countries, excluding France, which on the contrary seems to apply a kind of monopoly of non-religion, there is some weak form of religious monopoly of a dominant confession.

[5] Without syncretism no common religious lexicon could exist and therefore no new religious proposal could find an adequate listener, on the other hand without exclusivism any metaphysical advantage that would make it convenient to support the cost of abandoning the old rites, beliefs and habits would disappear.

[6] Cf.*The Soul, its Sorrows, and its Aspirations. An Assay towards the Natural History of the Soul as the True Basis of Theology*, 1st ed. 1849.

[7] W. James,*The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1985, p. 16.

[8] James's unconscious appears from this point of view particularly ambiguous: first, taking James's speech to the letter, it should be understood as a sort of spare wheel of the individual, who can save himself from anguish, allowing another of his possible 'self's to emerge; on the other hand, by just forcing James's discourse, one could think of it as an alternative to Jung's collective unconscious without its potentially reactionary ambiguities: we can only imagine what is part of our culture and can be understood starting from it, even if we can remix the pieces of a puzzle in a radically innovative way by building something totally innovative. After all, to use the terminology of Ernest Renan, every *génie religieux* (among which George Fox can certainly be counted) did just that.

[9] Cf. for instance the small volume by V. Girotto, T. Pievani, G. Vallortigara,*Nati per credere*, Codice edizioni, Milano 2008.

[10] Cf. his article of 1992 'No ponga tua sucia manos sobre Mozart'. Algunas consideraciones sobre el concepto de tolerancia, Italian translation in *Tolleranza, responsabilità e stato di diritto*, il Mulino, Bologna 2003.

[11] M. Warnock,*Limiti della tolleranza*, in S. Mendus – D. Edwards (eds), *Saggi sulla tolleranza*, II Saggiatore , Milan 1980.

[12] G. Valdés, op.cit. p.166.