

TOLERANCE AND INTOLERANCE. CONTEMPORARY ATTITUDES WITHIN THE RELIGIOUS, RACIAL, NATIONAL, AND POLITICAL SPHERE

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ABSTRACT. Tolerance is an often debated topic in the contemporary global village. It is permanently invoked and accusations of intolerance are equally frequent. It is said that when a word is too much used it loses its deep meaning, its essence, its initial purpose, so that it becomes nothing more than a meaningless word among other meaningless words making up a discourse. The word *tolerance* is not an exception. We hear it every day in the street, at school, in debates, and especially on television. We might ask ourselves what tolerance still means in the contemporary world. Is it a virtue or just a convention used at international level? These questions start, on the one hand, from Fethullah Gulen's words who says that tolerance is forgiveness, forgiveness of all sins, compassion and mercy for the whole Creation, the hiding of people's shame and mistakes, and on the other hand from the realities of the 21st century, the global world ordered by laws, rules, conventions. The present paper is an attempt to define and to comment on the concepts of tolerance and intolerance.

KEY WORDS: religion, tolerance, society, mentality, attitude, acceptance of otherness

Introduction

Tolerance is an extremely present topic in the contemporary global village. It is permanently invoked accusations of intolerance are equally frequent. It is said that when a word is too much used it loses its deep meaning, its essence, its initial purpose, so that it becomes nothing more than a meaningless word among other meaningless words making up a discourse. The word *tolerance* is not an exception. We hear it every day in the street, at school, in debates, and especially on television. We might ask ourselves what

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tolerance still means in the contemporary world. Is it a virtue or just a convention used at international level? These questions start, on the one hand, from Fethullah Gulen's words who says that tolerance is forgiveness, forgiveness of all sins, compassion and mercy for the whole Creation, the hiding of people's shame and mistakes, and on the other hand from the realities of the 21st century, the global world ordered by laws, rules, conventions. The present paper is an attempt to define and to comment on the concepts of tolerance and intolerance.

Tolerance versus Intolerance

The word *tolerance*¹ designates a fair and objective attitude toward opinions and practices that differ from one's own. It is usually employed within a religious, racial, national or political sphere. One of the main religions sweeping the world at large today is not Christianity, nor is it Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, Mormonism or any other ended by the suffix-ism. Rather, it is the religion of "tolerance". As John Funk suggests in the article *The Religion of Tolerance*,

The cry of tolerance echoes throughout the land. It is used as a benchmark when assessing the attributes of possible leaders and its opposite is used to castigate those who threaten the idea of acceptance. The tolerance spoken of today does not pertain to unlawful discrimination based upon race, gender, national origin, creed or religion but rather it is a tolerance of lifestyle.²

By extending the meaning, tolerance indicates a liberal attitude, an undogmatic viewpoint towards the views and actions of others. Another connotation of the word refers to the act or capacity of enduring, specifically the power to endure or resist the action of drug, poison or substance. We may also refer to an attitude towards those who do not share our axiological system as well as our attitude of enduring those factors hostile to our ego. Thus, this word generally confines to the sphere of positive values, those values that depicts an individual, in contrast with the world *toleration*, which

- 1 The term *tolerance* according to *Interdisciplinary Research and Studies* (Iași: Ștef, 2010, 21) was identified with the following meanings: 1. the state or quality of being tolerant; 2. capacity to endure something, especially pain or hardship; 3. the permitted variation in some measurement or other characteristic of an object or workpiece.
- 2 John Funk, "The Religion of Tolerance", *Tolerance* (Rapture Ready, 2012), ed. By C. Barbu, *The History of Human Civilisation-Booklet* (Iași: Ștef, 2012), 76.

derives from the same linguistic root but has a different meaning. To tolerate harmful acts, evil such as a theft, lie, hypocrisy does not reveal a positive feature, who is tolerant, despicable acts or attitudes does not enjoy moral admiration, not even nowadays when moral standards have been severely decreased.

There might be claimed that both words, *tolerance* in particular, signify an opening, an acceptance of the difference in whatever manner it may manifest. To be tolerant means not to oppose to someone on the sole ground that is different. The word also designates the degree in which physical characteristic features, hardness, weight, height may vary.

We can therefore elicit that *tolerance* is the expression of a relationship that inextricably connects the evaluator or receiver and the appraised item, be it a human being or an object. This relationship measures the degree of acceptance or endurance of the receiver toward the receiver item.

If we transfer this relationship to the human universe, we will undoubtedly conclude that the meaning accurately limit the border how acceptable is an individual who is not like us.

A psychologist may claim that there are human individuals who are more tolerant, endowed with a higher degree of objectiveness along with less tolerant or not at all tolerant individuals for whom it is difficult if not altogether impossible to accept diversity. Innumerable examples can be seen everywhere: the American white population had hardly accepted that the black population belong to the same race and consequently have equal rights. The black population had understood and accepted that they themselves had obligations too.

To trace back the oldest example in history: Jews were totally intolerant to idol-worshipping neighbours. Nero's Romans were not tolerant to early Christians; centuries later certain Aryans were drastically intolerant to other races. Elderly may become intolerant to the youth who behave differently from what the former had been accustomed to as the young ones view the whole elderly category as a hindrance on their path to success. Men are visibly intolerant to those women of substance (intolerance being the lowest degree of tolerance).

Intolerance hews its way everywhere. There are peremptory proves that an intolerant person is a harsh nature lacking empathy, less resistant to adverse exogenous factors, or factors which may look adverse to him.

Intolerance may sometimes reveal a certain fear—conscious or not—to the other person who menaces his security in a way or another. If, for in-

stance, an ethnical minority menaces the jobs which are usually occupied by the majority, this minority will be initially regarded suspiciously, then with hostility, later treated intolerantly. This is the well-known case of those immigrants coming from poverty-stricken countries, or from colonies, or from force-major affected zones, e.g., conflict zones.

To remain inside the same game actors-majority as receiver and immigrants as exogenous factor, an intolerant attitude of the former can be observed as the receivers lead a certain standard of living while immigrants—in many cases—cannot or are not willing to fit into the coordinates of a new standard of living. The latter, through their inability or lack of determination to fit in will undoubtedly cause an intolerant attitude in those who have not spared their efforts to improve their life conditions, conditions that are far better than those immigrants came from. This inability to fit in can be explained by an insufficient mental education development which makes the person who has settled in a place highly different from his native spot to long for recreating his original micro cosmos as his native world—certainly more rudimentary—imposes infinitely less rigour. Lacking know-how and determination to go ahead the person strives hard to live as he was used to by making a universe he is compatible with, but which is partly or unacceptable for the receiver. Can, in this case, the receiver's intolerant attitude be incriminated, when initially the receiver manifested—openly or not—his intolerance toward the new comer's behaviour then extending his intolerance toward the very persons who do not observe the behaviour commandments of those on whose territory he has been living.

In the history of European culture in the early sixteenth century, the notion of *tolerance* is closely related to humanistic thinking, embodied in the person of Erasmus of Rotterdam, in its effort to combat religious fanaticism. Other personalities have consistently shown the tolerant attitude in dealing with other opinions or representations of the world: John Locke (1632-1704), Voltaire (1694-1778) and Gotthold Lessing (1729-1781). John Locke, in *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), recommended tolerance in response to aberrant behavior “must be supported which is contrary to common usage”.³

Voltaire assigned the following phrase, later transformed in slogan of tolerance *Je n'aime pas vos idées, mais je me battraï jusqu'à la mort pour que vous*

3 John Locke, James Tully, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 1983), 23.

*puissiez les exprimer*⁴ (“I hate your ideas, but I will fight to the death so that you can express them”).

Opposite of tolerance is intolerance that can go up to fanaticism. Intolerance is one of the worst vices, which has put stigma on the history of human civilization and its spring comes, no doubt, of self-preservation instinct. Fear and caution ahead of what is natural is unknown and unusual, often derived to hostility and intolerance.

Views on Tolerance

The issue of intolerance has preoccupied thinkers of all times. A good example is forwarded by the English philosopher Francis Bacon (1561-1626)⁵ in his *Novum Organum*,

It is said that cabbage and wine are never on friendly terms as, if sewed too closely one to another, they do not rise because both being water consumers, they exhaust the soil and one robs the nourishing resources from the other.⁶

John Locke (1632-1704)⁷ claims that knowledge is not always reflected through opinions. The cognitive process is a complex mental process that implies two actors: one who is willing to know and another one who lets himself be down. We may therefore conclude that intolerance is generated by an insufficient knowledge. Locke, as well as Bacon, claims there are no in-born ideas. The way through which our minds come to know—partly, imperfectly, or totally—is described as follows:

- 4 François Voltaire, *The Friends of Voltaire*, ed. by Evelyn Beatrice Hall (London: Smith Elder, 1906), 98.
- 5 Francis Bacon was one of the leading figures in natural philosophy and in the field of scientific methodology in the period of transition from the Renaissance to the early modern era. As a lawyer, member of Parliament, and Queen’s Counsel, Bacon wrote on questions of law, state and religion, as well as on contemporary politics. He also published texts in which he speculated on possible conceptions of society, and he pondered questions of ethics (*Essays*) even in his works on natural philosophy (*The Advancement of Learning*).
- 6 Translation from Francis Bacon, *Novum Organon* (Bucureşti: Editura Academiei, 1957), 230.
- 7 While a student he had turned from the subtleties of Aristotle and his scholars, he had studied Descartes and Bacon, and becoming attracted to experimental science, studied medicine, and practised a little in Oxford. At the same time his mind had been much exercised by questions of morals and government, and in 1667 he wrote his *Essay on Toleration*.

At the beginning, senses allow penetration of the ideas which fill the mind chambers empty until that moment. The minds become accustomed with such ideas, order them in memory, and nominate them. Further on, the mind abstracts new ideas from the older ones and gets familiar with general terms. In this way, the mind enhances its functions with ideas and words, material on which it exercises its reasoning faculty.⁸

Locke follows this theory observing that the first ability of human intellect is that the minds can receive those impressions produced on it either by exogenous factors through senses or by its own functions.

Thomas Hobbes⁹ (1588–1679) defines the moral categories of the good and the evil as describing our prosperities and aversions, varying according to temperaments, customs and doctrines: “...people differ in their judgement, not only in what sensations (taste, smell, hearing, touch, sight) are concerned but also in what conforms to life acts”.¹⁰

Human beings definitely differ and their inability to accept others’ diversity is essentially intolerant. The amplitude of this negative feeling measures in degrees of its opponent, i.e. in tolerance degree. Intolerance cannot be measured by degrees, it has an absolute identity, it reveals lack of knowledge, empathy and acceptance. All in all, it reveals lack of love toward peers.

In his gracious *Statement of Love*, Gabriel Liiceanu (born 1942), a Romanian contemporary philosopher, explores the feelings of love:

What does opening mean? I think that it is a way of how we place ourselves toward someone who has lost his mental and affective reserves. Dens, lairs, nooks, shadows, duplicity “unuttered thought” become aimless as nothing is not to be preserved or hidden. Where does this confidence come, confidence that makes

8 Translation from John Locke, *Încercare asupra intelectului omenesc* (București: ESLSD, 1951), 32.

9 Hobbes was one of the most prominent Englishmen of his day, and has continued to influence philosophical thought more or less ever since, generally, however, by evoking opposition. His fundamental proposition is that all human action is ultimately based upon selfishness (more or less enlightened), allowing no place to the moral or social sentiments. Similarly in his political writings man is viewed as a purely selfish being who must be held in restraint by the strong hand of authority.

10 Translation from Thomas Hobbes, *Fragmente alese din Leviathan sau forma și puterea unui stat ecclesiastic și civil* (*Leviathan or the Matter, Form and Power of a Common Wealth Ecclesiastical and Civil*) (București: ESLSD, 1951).

you largely open the door of your being toward your peer? Where from does this togetherness in light come?¹¹

The author seeks the motivation of the opening toward the peers: "...this opening which signifies *to love* unwinds not only in the solemn life. Friendship equally implies a certain code of joy. It presumes an adjustment of the points of view on the essential issues as well as a taste coincidence".¹²

The above mentioned thoughts regarding love can be equally applied to tolerance. Tolerance is inextricably connected with "peers"—those that are of equal standing with us—as the Christian belief prescribes. God's Holy Son, Lord Jesus imposes love as his first commandment. Apostle Paul advises the Roman Christians emphasizing the power of love:

For Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not lust, and if there be any other commandment, it is summed up in their word, namely, Thou shalt love the neighbour as thyself. (Romans 13:9, *King James Version*.)

In the Epistle of Corinthians, the Apostle details the instances in which Christian tolerance manifests:

Love has long patience, is kind; love is not emulous; love is not insolent and rash, is not puffed up, does not behave in an unseemly manner, does not seek what is its own, is not quickly provoked, does not impute evil, does not rejoice at iniquity but rejoices with the truth, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. (Corinthians 13:4-8, *King James Version*)

Apostle Paul recommends tolerance:

1 Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations.
2 For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs.
3 Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him.

11 Translation from Gabriel Liiceanu, *Declarație de iubire* (București: Humanitas, 2001), 109.

12 *Ibid.*, 110.

4 Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand.

5 One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.

6 He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks". (Romans 14, *King James Version*).

This kind of love cannot lead to intolerance as it does not harm anyone. But is it synonymous with complete acceptance? Does it mean a passive acceptance of evil? Human society can only live within laws which define individual freedom as the right to behave in that manner as not to offend or harm other individuals.

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)¹³ emphasizes the difference between freedom in general and moral freedom that allows the sommoth development of a collectivity: "We feel ourselves morally free if we feel we control our habits or propensities and not if our habits or propensities control us".¹⁴

In the chapter where relationships are analyzed, Mill states his belief in the need for rules and laws within society. Such rules express the general tendencies of the masses. Man was endowed by God with free will that allows wach individual to choose between two or more alternatives. If the absence of a moral criterion—the only one that makes life within society possible—our free will may manifest destructively for other persons. Outside those commandments imposed by an ethic code, the lives of the individuls that belon to a certain collectivity may become very harsh. We can feel this in our everyday life. The newspaper man, who makes effort to earn his daily bread, exhibits pictorials of nakedness in obscene positions, ignoring the visual impact on children. Shall we be tolerant to those TV broadcasts which propose successful valueless starlets? Shall authorities be

13 John Stuart Mill, philosopher, was educated by his father with the view of making him the successor of Bentham and himself, as the exponent of the Utilitarian philosophy. In all respects he proved an apt pupil. At 15 he had studied classical literature, logic, political economy, and mathematics. His studies had led him to the adoption of the utilitarian philosophy, and after his return he became acquainted with Grote, the Austins, and other Benthamites.

14 J. S. Mill, in George Ene, *Filozofia politică a lui John Stuart Mill* (Iași: Polirom, 2000), 76.

tolerant to drug traders who make huge fortunes out of the physical and psychic destruction of young people? Shall we be tolerant to those who push young girls into prostitution? Ought we to be tolerant to evil that menaces other people?

A society that cannot protect its members by law, not by violence, from noxious influences that enslave abuse the individual, push him into harming himself or his peers is doomed to extinction.

“Evil societies always kill their consciences”, James Farmer wrote.¹⁵ Now, at the dawn of the 3rd millennium it is difficult to judge. According to David Brooks¹⁶, young people do not know what evil is. Young people do not recognize sin and have been raised to live a life that says, if it feels good to me, do it.

The Book of Luke mentions demons 23 times, which reveals the big picture of the good vs. evil that was taking place then. It’s interesting to note that so many people did not yet see who Jesus really was; yet, this demon recognized Him, calling Him “Jesus of Nazareth” and “the Holy One sent from God”. By naming Jesus, the demon shows the people how significant this battle really was.

The demon asked Jesus if He was going to destroy them. It’s hard to know if the demon meant all demons or just him and the man he had possessed. If he meant all demons, it shows the demon was aware of the power and authority Jesus had over all evil spirits. If he meant himself and the man, it shows the demon thought He had great control over the man—so much that Jesus could not destroy the demon without destroying the man. It really seems to be a challenge to Jesus, who takes it on and destroys the demon without harming the man.

Repeatedly, God’s Word shows that evil can’t stand up to righteousness when righteousness stands strong.

How do we define the word *evil*? What criteria do we use when depicting behaviour? Money making, being overvisible? Ignoring rules? Demolishing moral values? How will our children live in society tomorrow? For fear of not being intolerant shall we admit any offence?

15 <http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/civil%20rights%20quotes.htm>

16 <http://relativecomment.wordpress.com/2011/11/13/david-brooks-lazy-accusations-young-people-dont-recognize-evil-sin/>

Conclusion

Psychological studies, political campaigns, broadcasts workshop freedom as the final achievement. Tolerance has become a must. But a world without rules will lead to chaos. Money-makers, political interests have already started a destructive process. Lack of education, lack of authority of public institutions, lack of authority at home, in school—all these shatter abdicated from its moral role to become mere culture. Knowledge and competence are not necessary in accomplishments in the long run.

In the last hundred years, the human civilization almost self-destructive on several occasions has caused two world wars, the Holocaust, genocides and violent ethnic conflicts. Does the world have changed at the beginning of this new millennium? Looking at the map of the world, listening to the news shows that humanity is far from being taught the lesson of tolerance.

As a conclusion, evil has conquered everywhere as we are tolerant to it. Maybe the American writer, Helen Keller is right: „It is a mistake always to contemplate the good and ignore the evil, because by making people neglectful it lets in disaster”.¹⁷ Unfortunately for nowadays society there is a dangerous optimism of ignorance and indifference.

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17 Hellen Keller, *The History of Human Civilisation-Booklet*, ed. by Cornel Barbu (Iași: Ștef, 2012), 54.

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