Frank Furedi On Tolerance
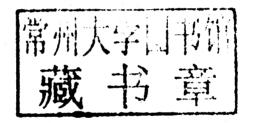
A Defence of Moral Independence

On Tolerance

A Defence of Moral Independence

FRANK FUREDI

continuum

ON TOLERANCE

Preface

Tolerance has been turned into a Hurrah Word, and emptied of its moral and intellectual meaning. The widespread celebration of tolerance in public statements and declarations is testimony to its rhetorical appeal, even as it becomes decreasingly significant as a moral principle for guiding official and public behaviour. The aim of this book is to argue the case for tolerance as a virtue in its own right. Tolerance requires both intellectual justification and cultural support. The capacity to tolerate requires that society takes freedom seriously; tolerating beliefs and views that are hostile to our own requires a degree of confidence in our own convictions, but also the disposition to take risks.

Tolerance is in danger of becoming denuded of its vital freedom-affirming meaning, and is instead frequently interpreted as a form of polite etiquette that offers its recipient respect and validation. Whereas the classical liberal interpretation of tolerance required conviction and judgement, today it frequently conveys the idea of respectful indifference. This book argues, first, that the reinterpretation of the meaning of the term 'tolerance' has created a situation where the principle is taken far less seriously. The second point emphasized is that, the rhetoric of tolerance notwithstanding, contemporary society is afflicted by a powerful sensibility of

此为试读，需要完整PDF请访问：www.ertongbook.com

intolerance. More energy is devoted towards the project of inventing new limits on tolerance than on extending it to new domains of human experience. The third and most important claim argued here is that the cultural values that dominate our lives find it difficult to sustain and uphold true tolerance: indeed, many of the prevailing cultural norms actually negate it.

Historically, intolerance is associated with religious and doctrinal fanaticism. The classical expressions of intolerance are laws against blasphemy, slander, libel and subversion. These classical manifestations of intolerance still survive as moral zealots attempt to protect their traditions and way of life from competing beliefs and secular lifestyles. However, in recent decades a new species of intolerance has become increasingly powerful. These days, calls for banning speech, policing thought and controlling behaviour often come from people who identify themselves as left of centre, open-minded and secular. It is the exploration of this very distinct contemporary manifestation of intolerance that constitutes the focus of this book. Why? Because with the expansion of intolerance across the political divide it is urgent to build a coalition of open-minded people who are genuinely inspired by the ideal of freedom, moral independence and democracy and who are prepared to uphold tolerance without equivocation.

This is not a philosophical text, whose objective is the exploration of the rights and wrongs of intolerance, or which assesses the different theories of toleration. The question that motivated this book is: why has tolerance lost its way? Finding answers to this question is crucial for the workings of a future-oriented, open society. This book is directed towards people who are genuinely open-minded and are prepared to engage with new experience. Tolerance requires consistency and strong

convictions regarding at least one moral principle – freedom.

This book has benefitted from the comments and criticism of friends and colleagues. In different ways Jennie Bristow, Brendan O'Neill and Wendy Kaminer helped clarify some of the arguments; of course they bear no responsibility for any of the book's faults. This book is dedicated to my father, Laszlo Furedi. Despite his best effort, he helped me understand that what matters is not simply what you believe but your commitment for taking responsibility.

Contents

1

Introduction: Clarifying the Issues

The idea of tolerance has been subject to significant conceptual confusions. Tolerance is often represented as a form of non-judgemental acceptance of other people's beliefs; yet, to tolerate a disagreeable opinion requires a prior act of judgement. In a world where acceptance of difference is represented as mandatory, the classical idea of tolerance has become problematic. It has either been rejected as far too negative or reinterpreted as a gesture of non-judgemental respect. Through examining the current reaction to tolerance, this introduction sets the scene for a review of its historical evolution.

Controversies over 'gays in the military', the wearing of the burka or the crucifix, or even whether it should be permissible to make offensive comments about someone's culture, indicate that twenty-first-century Western society has an uneasy relationship with the idea and practice of tolerance. As I write I receive a press release from a British think tank announcing that 'wearing the veil is a civil right' and insisting that 'British tolerance' means recognizing 'freedom of religious expression'. In America, too, the age-old question of religious tolerance is the subject of debate. On the eve of 11 September 2010, President Barack Obama felt it necessary to remind the public

of the necessity for religious tolerance, after a Florida-based Christian clergyman threatened to burn the Koran in protest against plans to build an Islamic centre two blocks from the site where the World Trade Center stood before its destruction. Some claim that tolerance has gone 'too far', and blame the culture of permissiveness in Western societies for a bewildering variety of social and moral problems, from pornography to the disintegration of the traditional family.

This book argues that, despite its frequent rhetorical use, twenty-first-century society does not take the classical liberal ideal of tolerance very seriously. Even its advocates practise their tolerance selectively, often legitimizing attitudes and behaviour that are censorious and unforgiving towards beliefs and views that challenge their assumptions. Matters are made worse by the confusions that surround the meaning of 'tolerance': the term finds itself used in ways that would shock the philosophers and thinkers who developed this concept. Here, we aim to clarify and elaborate the meaning of tolerance for the current era.

Tolerance is an important ideal that is indispensable for the working of a genuinely free and democratic society. Yet it is an ideal that we take for granted. Numerous articles and books on the subject treat it as a rather insignificant idea that doesn't go far enough to secure a just society. Others depict tolerance as a disinclination to judge or to have strong views about the behaviour of others, or deploy 'tolerance' as a synonym for 'permissive'. Increasingly, we are in danger of forgetting that tolerance is an intimate companion of liberty and freedom, and that it constitutes one of the most precious contributions of the Enlightenment imagination to modern life. Without tolerance we cannot be free, we cannot live with one another in relative peace, we cannot follow and act on our conscience, we cannot

exercise our moral autonomy nor pursue our own road towards seeking the truth.

In historical terms, tolerance is a very recent cultural and moral ideal. Until the seventeenth century the toleration of different religions, opinions and beliefs was interpreted as a form of moral cowardice, if not a symptom of heresy. Indeed medieval witch-hunters and inquisitors were no less concerned with stigmatizing those who questioned their intolerant practices than they were with hunting down witches and heretics. The fifteenth-century witch-hunters' manual *Malleus Maleficarum* claimed that those who denied the existence of witches or questioned the methods of the inquisitors were as guilty of heresy as the active practitioners of witchcraft. In the following century, scepticism was frequently treated as a particularly dangerous form of anti-Christian heresy. As the French historian Paul Hazard notes in his pioneering study *The European Mind*, until the seventeenth century tolerance 'had not been a virtue at all, but, on the contrary, a sign of weakness, not to say cowardice', and 'duty and charity' forbade people to be tolerant.[1] As late as 1691, the French theologian Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet boasted that Catholicism was the least tolerant of all religions, stating that 'I have the right to persecute you because I am right and you are wrong'.[2] Protestant religious figures more than matched Bossuet's intolerance. Indeed the Walloon synod of Leyden, mainly composed of Huguenot refugees, condemned religious toleration as a form of heresy.[3]

It was in the seventeenth century that attitudes towards tolerating competing ideas and religions began to change. In part the rise of secularism and rationality encouraged a more sceptical orientation towards religious dogmatism and intolerance. Although there are some historical exceptions, people are far less likely to impose their beliefs on others when they are not

absolutely certain of their convictions. This was also a period when Europe was overwhelmed by bitter religious conflicts that frequently resulted in bloody civil wars. In such circumstances, calls for tolerance were influenced by the pragmatic calculation that without a measure of religious toleration, endemic violence and bloodshed could not be avoided. This was the moment when a significant minority of Europeans recognized that tolerance was a prerequisite for their society's survival. The American philosopher Michael Walzer emphasizes the significance of this insight when he states that toleration 'sustains life itself': we need to remind ourselves that 'toleration makes difference possible; difference makes toleration necessary'.[4] From this perspective toleration is not only a moral or philosophical principle, but also a matter of pragmatic necessity. It is precisely because many differences cannot be resolved philosophically that tolerance becomes the only alternative to conflict and violence.

The aim of seventeenth-century advocates of tolerance, including John Locke, was to protect religious belief from state coercion. Locke's advocacy of toleration represented a call for restraining political authorities from interfering with the workings of individual conscience and lifestyles. Over the centuries this affirmation of religious tolerance has expanded to allow the free expression of opinions, beliefs and behaviour associated with the exercise of the individual conscience. Tolerance is intimately connected to the assertion of this most basic dimension of freedom, and demands that we accept the right of people to live according to beliefs and opinions that are different, sometimes antithetical, to ours. Tolerance does not invite us to accept or celebrate other people's sentiments, but requires that we live with them and desist from interfering or forcing others to fall in line with our own views. As Murphy

writes, 'neither conceptually nor historically is toleration affiliated with approval of diversity or with intellectual, religious, or moral pluralism *per se*'.[5]

In this book the concept of tolerance is used in two senses. It pertains to the domain of the political/philosophical through its avowal of the principle of non-interference towards the way that people develop and hold beliefs and opinions. Tolerance affirms the freedom of conscience and individual autonomy. As long as an act does not violate a person's moral autonomy and harm others, tolerance also calls for the absence of constraint on behaviour linked to the exercise of individual autonomy. From this perspective, tolerance can be measured in relation to the extent to which people's belief and behaviour is not subject to institutional and political interference and restraint. Second, tolerance is a social/cultural accomplishment, and a tolerant society is one where the cultural orientation discourages and restrains social intolerance. This was a concern eloquently pursued by the philosopher J. S. Mill, who warned about the 'tyranny' of public opinion and its tendency to stigmatize and silence minority and dissident beliefs. Upholding the disposition to be tolerant is always a challenge, and experience shows that legal safeguards can always come unstuck when confronted by a tidal wave of social intolerance.

What tolerance is not

Anyone perusing policy documents, mission statements, school textbooks and speeches made by politicians and policymakers is likely to be struck by the frequency with which the term 'tolerance' is celebrated. It is difficult to encounter any significant acclaim for intolerance. However, on closer inspection it becomes evident that the meaning of this term has radically

altered, mutating into a superficial signifier of acceptance and affirmation. In official documents and school texts, tolerance is used as a desirable character trait rather than as a way of managing conflicting beliefs and behaviour. So one can be tolerant without any reference to a set of beliefs or opinions. Moreover, the idea that tolerance means not interfering with, or attempting to suppress, beliefs that contradict one's own sentiments has given way to the idea that tolerance involves not judging other people and their views. Instead of serving as a way of responding to differences of views, tolerance has become a way of not taking them seriously.

When tolerance is represented as a form of detached indifference or as a polite gesture connoting mechanical acceptance, it becomes a vice rather than a virtue. One reason why tolerance was historically interpreted as a virtue was because it implied a willingness to tolerate disagreeable beliefs and opinions. According to the classical liberal outlook, it involved an act of judgement and discrimination; but judgement did not serve as a prelude to censoring another person's wrong views, because tolerance demands respect for people's right to hold beliefs in accordance with their conscience. Indeed, the recognition of the primacy of freedom imposed on the truly tolerant the responsibility to refrain from attempting to coerce religious and political opponents into silence. Voltaire's frequently repeated statement, 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it', expressed the intimate connection between judgement/disapproval and a commitment to freedom. The capacity to tolerate views of which one disapproves is underpinned by the conviction that this virtue provides an opportunity for testing out ideas and confronting ethical dilemmas. Interference with individual belief and opinion disrupts the creative dynamic of intellectual and moral

development of society. From this standpoint, tolerance of disapproved-of beliefs is a very small price to pay for society's intellectual and moral development.

In contemporary public discussion, the connection between tolerance and judgement is in danger of being lost. Our analysis of the current usage of the word 'tolerant' indicates that it is frequently used as a companion term with 'inclusive' and 'non-judgemental'. As a fascinating survey of American political culture concludes, 'Thou shalt not judge' has become the eleventh commandment of middle-class Americans. Alan Wolfe, the study's author, notes that 'middle-class Americans are reluctant to pass judgement on how other people act and think'.[6] While the reluctance to judge other people's behaviour has its attractive qualities, it is not necessarily a manifestation of social tolerance. All too often this attitude is synonymous with not caring about the fate of others. Yet the precondition for the working of a democratic public sphere is openness to conversation and debate. Reflecting on our differences with others' points of view, letting them know where we stand and what we find disagreeable in their opinions, is the very stuff of a vibrant democracy. Without it tolerance turns into shallow indifference, an excuse for switching off when others talk.

The confusion of the concept of tolerance with the idea of acceptance and valuation of other people's beliefs and lifestyles is strikingly illustrated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Declaration on the Principles of Tolerance, which frames the term thus: 'tolerance is respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human' and it is 'harmony in difference'.[7] For UNESCO toleration becomes an expansive and diffuse sensibility that automatically accepts and offers unconditional

appreciation of different views and cultures. This officially sanctioned declaratory rhetoric of tolerance is often used in schools, and children interpret it as an exhortation to be nice to other people. Children are taught that a nice person is a tolerant one, and tolerance is diagnosed as a psychological trait – a variant of other fashionable pedagogic values such as empathy, self-esteem, or valuing yourself.

The reinterpretation of tolerance as a psychological attitude that conveys acceptance, empathy and respect means that in public deliberations it has lost its real meaning. Yet it is precisely the intimate connection between disapproval/disagreement and toleration that endows tolerance with the potential to enhance the quality of public life. The act of toleration demands reflection, restraint and a respect for the right of other people to find their way to their truth. Once tolerance signifies a form of automatic acceptance, it becomes a performance in expected behaviour. As David Heyd writes, the shift in meaning, 'which rests on easy acceptance of the heterogeneity of values and ways of life', pushes 'the concept of tolerance dangerously close to that of indifference'. The 'scope of indifference is growing in the field of value judgments, and . . . liberalism today means less the toleration of other ways of life than the cool acceptance of the very plurality and heterogeneity of lifestyles'.[8] So inadvertently well-meaning exhortations to tolerate discourage people from developing their moral capacity to understand, judge and discriminate. In education where tolerance is represented as an attitude to be learned, it becomes 'detached from affirming any moral views'.[9]

The detachment of toleration from any specific object has encouraged a widely practised pedagogy that instructs children to 'tolerate diversity' or 'tolerate difference'. Such pedagogy self-consciously avoids encouraging children to develop their

capacity for moral reasoning or the making of moral judgements. However, descriptive terms like 'difference' or 'diversity' possess no intrinsic moral qualities – they are some of the conditions of life within which reasoning, including moral reflection, occurs. When tolerance becomes disassociated from a reflection of contrasting beliefs and opinions, children are protected from troubling themselves with the challenge of engaging with moral dilemmas. In such circumstances, tolerance becomes a colloquial idiom for approval.

The call to reinterpret tolerance as a sentiment conveying non-judgementalism or indifference is often presented as a positive character trait of the open-minded person. But the gesture of affirmation and acceptance can be seen as a way of avoiding making difficult moral choices and of disengaging from the complicated challenge of explaining the values that have to be upheld. It is far easier to dispense with the idea of moral judgement than to explain why a certain way of life is preferable to the one that should be tolerated but not embraced.

Tolerance has also been adapted by well-meaning national and international agencies and institutions as an adjective that conveys the sense of harmony and peacefulness. Not infrequently it is depicted as the polar opposite to conflict. The UNESCO Declaration on Tolerance is paradigmatic in this respect. Its call for tolerance is presented as a response to

> the current rise in acts of intolerance, violence, terrorism, xenophobia, aggressive nationalism, racism, anti-Semitism, exclusion, marginalization and discrimination directed against national, ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, refugees, migrant workers, immigrants and vulnerable groups within societies, as well as acts of violence and intimidation committed against individuals exercising their freedom of opinion and