

Education and the Paradigm of Tolerance

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Abstract

Living alongside one another in a spirit of acceptance evokes the concept of tolerance that, from Erasmus da Rotterdam to Voltaire to Primo Mazzolari, calls upon us to understand that the only possible choice for mankind, from time immemorial, has been to educate towards coexistence within milieus that increasingly differ by culture, customs, ways of thinking and behaviours. Beliefs and concepts sometimes refer to values that may also be quite remote from and unlike ours and, as a result, our capacity to find points of contact with other persons becomes the condition, not only for survival, but for growth itself as a human person. To know how to interpret and yet keep one's own points of reference is a constant challenge to our intelligence guided by the will to do good. The concept of free will is based precisely on the strength of the human will, driven to dedicate itself to whatever safeguards, or to turn away from the search for salvation. Freedom cannot exist if we replace it with new absolutisms and mental blocks that hinder the realisation of that growing humanisation plan, founded on responsibility and care. This paper broaches the subject of the relevance of education to tolerance: on one hand, a plan for detecting the limits within us and, on the other, the need for creating a human community, with the purpose of defining a common interest to live for and commit ourselves. So, it is a matter of choosing whether to live through another cold war or shift towards much more promising horizons of encounter and solidarity.

Keywords: Tolerance, Humanism, Community, Values Education, Human rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism

Introduction

Among the most enlightened minds, still recognised today as the progenitors of European humanism, Erasmus da Rotterdam is most assuredly to be remembered as he who raised his voice in support of freedom of intellect and a choice of peace, already in the sixteenth century, an era of great religious conflicts. As Henry Kamen (1967, p. 24) recalls, Erasmus (in

1523) maintained the inescapable choice of man, the choice of peace and harmony, overstepping any and every intolerance for religious reasons, in the expression *Summa nostrae religionis pax est et unanimitas*. During his lifetime, this great humanist showed how cultivation of the humanities was the true source of purification of the Church, which should doubtlessly be freed from the dogmas that were forcing it into confines of superstition and fanaticism. Disputes could not be acknowledged, even if they were the work of princes and, as he usually proclaimed, instead of war, one should learn to use the pen. War was a lack of search for fraternity and ideologies intensified the differences to the point where even those who talked about following the teachings of the Gospel, like the reformists, were open to behaviours that were anything but motivated towards agreement.

Nonetheless, although recognising the limitations of Luther, Erasmus did not believe he was to be persecuted and treated with force. The cities engaged in fighting should not destroy each other, but rather, and preferably, each group should stay within its own territory until there was a meeting of the minds in a healthy compromise for living without killing each other. Hence, overcoming dogmas and converging around essential truths could be the prerequisites for a peaceful life, in which religion was not the cause of hostility and intolerance. Allowing for free and open discussion amounted to permitting everyone to express positions that might enable a path towards agreement, assuming this was the common objective.

What often happens is that, when a difference of views occurs, one opts for the view that the majority deems fairer and also true. As concerns free will, Erasmus led the discussion about this subject-matter, with respect to which it is good to confirm or deny fundamental truths. He asked the reader to evaluate the topics he proposed, either in favour or not of some theories, hereby taking into account that some thoughts came from judgements expressed by scientists, saints and theologians, while others represented judgements expressed by “any person or two” (Erasmus, 1989, p. 12). One might also wonder if it is the quantity or, rather, the quality that should guide our judgement and, thus, our decision. We question ourselves about the weight of the ideas and examine whether it is commensurate with the number of votes, or if it is founded on the correctness of what such ideas express or convey. The object of the choice is frequently neglected and we let ourselves be guided by the stance of some people who, if they are eloquent and captivating, with a certain dose of demagoguery, could persuade us towards affirmations that our reason, when calm and free, would never accept. If numbers should prevail over quality, this would not automatically mean that the better choice has been made. For convenience sake, the majority may approve something that does not correspond to the search for truth; for this reason, persons, such as teachers and educators, are required to

assure an action of revelation and prophecy. If we were all informed at birth, there would be no reason to live together, meet and reach common views that allow for interpretations with meanings that may approach the plan for eternal salvation. On the other hand, if everything were so clear and easy to understand, there would be no need for discussion and education to tolerance.

Risks of superstition

In his treaty on tolerance, Voltaire (1763) showed how a single voice thrown into an angry crowd can instigate situations of negligence, even by those in authority whose task it is to dispense justice, as divine as it is human. How can one leave a majority that condemns the innocent and even governs those who should guarantee the respect for civil, human and social rights? Knowing how to distinguish between superstition and being able to choose the direction of respect and fraternity is the capacity Erasmus was talking about from another perspective. Weakness of minds, lack of culture, ignorance and prejudice, non-preparation to judgement calculated on facts and documents, and fanaticism may lead to simply considering anyone who does not think along the same lines guilty of a misdeed.

The call made by Umberto Eco (2012, 1990) to negative realism likens to a new confirmation of what is defined as a healthy search for the truth, starting from the interpretation of a fact that could repudiate some of our interpretations, from which, most probably, we could never definitely separate ourselves. Being willing to rethink and steadily adjust becomes a relevant strategy for surpassing the risks of modern absolutism that go from the intolerance of tolerance to the invariable interpretation of tolerance. One might ask oneself if the search for truth is solely a matter of interpretation or if, rather, it also requires a capacity for non-prejudicial and non-superstitious reasoning. In truth, even in the novel *Il nome della rosa* (1980) we find Eco's choice to liberate a manuscript from obscurity and, with it, a bit of history, unquestionably marked by the horror of the inquisition, but also by the intellectual forces that opposed its manifestations. The story of Adso da Melk leads us by the hand in discovering truths that the wisdom of the teacher, William of Baskerville, reveals, as if they were quite obvious, but passed unobserved by minds and feelings frozen by the inquisition. An example of intolerance masked by religious belief and the conviction of being the sole, eternal guardians of knowledge meant for only a few. And so, while the Abbot explains the divine mission that consigns custody of the word of God to the monks, William ingenuously concludes with a pragmatic, simple question-phrase that makes one smile that can be summarised in the unexplainable prohibition to access culture in the name of faithfulness to the sacred.

“<If God has now given our order a mission, it is to oppose this race to the abyss, by preserving, repeating and defending the treasure of wisdom our fathers entrusted to us. Divine Providence has ordered that the universal government, which at the beginning of the world was in the East, should gradually, as the time was nearing fulfilment, move westward, to warn us that the end of the world was approaching, because the course of events has already reached the confines of the universe. But until the millennium occurs definitely all, until the triumph, however brief, of the foul beast that is the Antichrist, it is up to us to defend the treasure of the Christian world and the very word of God, as he dictated it to the prophets and the apostles, as the fathers repeated it without changing a syllable, as schools have tried to gloss it, even if today, in the schools themselves the serpent of pride, envy, folly is nesting. In this sunset, we are still torches and light, high on the horizon. And as long as these walls shall stand, we shall be the custodians of the divine Word. > <Amen,> said William, in a devout tone. <But what does this have to do with the fact that the library may not be visited?>” (Eco, 1980, pp. 44-45).

Going beyond the textual narration, what dominates the subject is the strong opposition between those who deem themselves guardians of great missions and impose them on others, scrupulously and violently, and those who humbly follow the will of God, choosing the path of poverty and doubt. We would not seem to be faced with a problem of interpretation, but rather, we sense the depth of that inner question that is attempting to understand what frees from fundamentalisms and what opens the mind to the truth that shapes the human person.

The limits of tolerance

Voices have been raised to defend the limits of tolerance. As Philippe Sassier observes (2000, pp. 166-169), the distinction between tolerate and leave it as is does not mean the same thing. Hunger and poverty are not to be tolerated; injustice and persecution are not to be tolerated; indifference and passiveness when faced with evil are not to be tolerated.

The path of man and philosophical thought indisputably leads to the principle of universal tolerance. However, rationality is not enough to understand many of the human problems and we regretfully note that, due to a lack of balance, feelings sometimes guide us more than reason, without neglecting that matters given over to reason do not always render choices of death or violence plausible. Tyrannies claim to act rationally and justify interventions that end in mass murder and the privation of human rights in the name of a faith, a belief or defence of identity. Actions and interventions that would not be allowed in other contexts. What has been happening in Nigeria since 2001, caused by local groups, such as the Islamic

fundamentalist organisation Boko Haram, represents the decline of religion, used to justify violent actions that reduce the human person to a state of submission, obedience and slavery, by taking advantage of the weakness of defenceless young people, abducted and forcefully removed from the safety of their families and lifelong communities, if not actually killed.

For years, Shirin Ebadi (2006), awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his commitment to defending human rights and supporting democracy, has been repeating the value of schools and education against ideologies that kill, such as what is also happening with Isis. In parallel, intolerance results in as many legal and criminal occurrences as violations of religious freedom and the dignity of being human, which reach possible reparations and even extreme consequences. There is evidence of this in both the experience of Meriam Yehya Ibrahim, accused of apostasy and then freed (2014), and the tragic end of the spouses Shama and Shahzad Masih (Pakistani Christian Association in Italy, 2014) burned alive on 4 November 2014 because they were Christians. Prior to this, the assassination of Shahbaz Bhatti, Minister of Minorities in Pakistan, on 2 March 2011, had raised indignation throughout the world (Bhatti, 2008; Milano, 2012) and made it clear that dialogue among religions was still delicate and fragile. The political use of religion for the purpose of asserting ethnic and national identity is going through a new critical phase that challenges a much-discussed relationship between politics and religion. The law makes this relationship possible on a footing of social equality and non-discrimination, for both cultural and religious reasons. In his *Letter Concerning Toleration*, John Locke abundantly describes the risks of religion becoming a “pretext” for committing injustices:

“Nobody, therefore, in fine, neither single persons nor churches, nor even commonwealths, have any just title to invade the civil rights and worldly goods of each other upon pretense of religion. Those that are of another opinion would do well to consider with themselves how pernicious a seed of discord and war, how powerful a provocation to endless hatreds, rapines, and slaughters they thereby furnish unto mankind. No peace and security, no, not so much as common friendship, can ever be established or preserved amongst men so long as this opinion prevails, that dominion is founded in grace and that religion is to be propagated by force of arms”. (Locke, Translated from the Latin by William Popple, 1689, p. 15).

There is no shortage of signs of the international recognition of the need for encounter, as the exercise of a universally recognised right, if one thinks that, just now, in 2014, the Nobel Prize was awarded to Malala Yousafzai (2013) for peace and the defence of the rights of children, referring, in particular, to women’s rights to education: a statement that tolerance is not exclusively a question of good sense, but also the sole reply to a civility that is vastly shared for our survival. It is an educational action

for the formation of consciences towards a constitutional culture that democratic countries choose to pursue, as a preferred path of social responsibility and participation in the continuation of our existence.

For an alliance between law and culture

In schools, the study of the *Constitution of the Republic of Italy* (1948), on a theoretical level and its practical implications, constitutes a guarantee for the awareness and acquisition of the competences required for implementing those principles that represent the formalisation of national awareness and the joint focusing on common; worldwide goals of recognising the dignity of the human person (Corradini, 2014). Referred to, more specifically, is Article 3 of the Constitution that states: “All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions. It is the duty of the Republic to remove those obstacles of an economic and social nature, which constrain the freedom and equality of citizens, thereby impeding the full development of the human person and the effective participation of all workers in the political, economic and social organisation of the country”, and Article 8 that emphasises how: “All religious denominations are equally free before the law. Denominations other than Catholicism have the right to self-organisation, according to their own statutes, provided these do not conflict with Italian law. Their relations with the State are regulated by law based on agreements with their respective representatives”. On this subject, and from an international standpoint, we draw on three points in Article 26 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), which reads: “(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. (2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace. (3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children” (Centro diritti umani, 2008, p. 51).

It can definitely be said that as much the constitutional charter as international recommendations, indicate the horizon value to be followed to make tolerance a way of thinking, in which the right of education means knowledge and exercise of human rights. In describing the evolution of tolerance from Erasmus to John Stuart Mill, the academic David Merli

(2003, pp. 389-391), reaches the conclusion that religions tend to increase with a parallel growth of diversification, rather than unification. The multiplication could be a sign of vitality, but it could also forge a passage to new conflicts. From this point of view, the analysis is augmented by the universal message spread by the Church, which, particularly during the Second Vatican Council (1965), called for the tolerance of Catholics for everyone, even atheists, since everyone contributes to building the world in which we live and, for this purpose, dialogue is to be considered a plausible, shareable form, through which the right position for the fundamental rights of the human person can be found. It follows that the pledge to live the right to life, the right to education and the right to peace and justice can never be considered depleted, but, rather, is to be rendered vibrant in the closest and farthest human vicissitudes. According to Gianni Manzone (2004, pp. 7-16), multicultural societies are the ones that feel problems of tolerance the most, due to both the pluralism of values and the asymmetry of the distribution of power (Galeotti, 1994). The only possible path is that of dialogue, as much interpersonal as institutional, in which taking care of the person implies interpreting his or her past experience, not limited to the historical and social contingency, but aimed at a project of universal transcendence.

The condition for living together

At the end of the Second World War, Primo Mazzolari reflected on the need for tolerance that originated in the past in a Europe troubled by religious struggles. Whether due to scepticism or Christian charity, people felt that hate in the name of a creed and a profession of faith could not continue to be nurtured.

This issue was brought up again whenever the divisions caused a distancing from a common point of contact. In fact, if we were able to define a general interest around which we could all converge, without worrying about our particular passions and specific desires, the necessity to pursue and spread the culture of tolerance would drop away. Reality, however, is quite another matter.

We continue to fight wars and sign treaties. It seems hostilities divide us more than friendships bring us closer. The language is the same, and yet, what we feel inside carries us to raise borders and walls. As the divisions escalate, we perceive how indispensable it is to turn to what can unite and no longer separate us. This allows us to live in our essentiality, without feeling threatened by peremptory, devastating judgements. It is where the understanding of tolerance begins, as a *forma mentis* that prepares thinking towards the other as thinking aimed at good. Mazzolari wrote that tolerance, which “could also be called ‘the effort to think good thoughts’, as Pascal put it, is the condition for living together” (2013, p. 58).

If freedom was missing before, what is now missing is tolerance, in which the principle of equality of all men is affirmed both before God and in interpersonal relations. We were created as equals, but unlike one another in personality; we are thus dissimilar. The profile of a tolerant person is a person who sees and accepts equality as much as dissimilarity. We are equal by dignity and respect, but different by emotions, feelings, thoughts and personalities. The profile of the intolerant person is a person who is devoid of a sense of equality and would like everyone to be modelled the same way, shaped with precision, making it possible to overcome the unpredictability and surprise that arise from dissimilarity.

From a political point of view, we can observe that a tolerant government recognises the equality and dissimilarity of its citizens, chooses respect for freedom, is the government of a population that actively participates in defining and observing the laws and is the government of democracy. Vice versa, an intolerant government is run by one, or a few persons, denies equality and suppresses dissimilarity, forcing everyone to conform, and abolishes creativity and spontaneity; it does not heed the authenticity of behaviours and the value of the uniqueness of each person. The tolerant government may also not be as ordered and disciplined as the intolerant one, but it is worth more, because it is founded on human respect; it is a vital government, in which peace springs from trust and does not fall to pieces due to the consumption of a rule and the intolerability of unshared impositions.

If the States require a philosophical project for eternal peace, as Kant hypothesised, we as people, need a natural agreement of tolerance, as Mazzolari foreshadowed (2013, p. 117). At this point in our thinking, we can definitely say that, today, the subject, problem and choice of tolerance acquire an unbounded extension that cannot be confined to an option of resolution of religious, political and ideological conflicts. This is an option of vast proportions that entails both commonality and taking up a position against revived racisms and reiterated social injustices.

Tolerance is also what makes us compassionate with ourselves and others. It is feeling mercy and pain that makes us accept limitations so as to understand that to offer hand or ask for help are profoundly human actions in a host community. Such actions enable warding off the destruction of those who are often rejected, because they are weak and helpless, and have no say, and yet have a life to be expressed in full. Solidarity starts with a sense of charity that does not sustain situations in which persons must submit to a way of thinking that crushes them and does not free them. Mazzolari's message anticipates what the core of rebuilding the value of the person was, in a society subjected to destabilising forces, as well as human identity and

the stability of being God's creature, during the years following the Second World War.

Conclusion: Our intellectual duty

The course of reflection followed in this essay has taken moves from the proposition of the subject of choice, understanding it as the ability to distinguish between the many paths of the mind and heart, having a preference for those oriented towards the realisation of what is congenial to human nature, since they are consistent with the path of civilisation to date and with the idea of tolerance on which our coexistence is based. If the authority of the texts written by well-known academics, as Erasmus sustained, has its reasons to be in the cultural heritage that accompanies us, it is true that within that limitless mass of knowledge we find traces of acceptance of those who do not think as we do and, because of this, cannot be treated as a person condemned to death by courts of men and laws they enact, as Voltaire sustained.

The truth has been revealed on a religious plane, but it is to resurface, day after day, as a wealth of the experience that resides in the inner life of others and that my interpretation, our interpretation, is manifested by continuous discoveries and not once and for all. Along this path, Eco leads through the labyrinths of the Middle Ages and post-modern times to show both the depth of knowledge and the risks of its limitations.

Culture is the name given to those forms of social living that become the roots of our national and cosmopolitan identity. An identity, not a dogma, subject to constant reformulations, always aided by more imagination and fertile creativity, the more the better as we learn to cultivate our humanity. Within this scenario, the call of Martha C. Nussbaum (1997) can be sustained, when she writes:

“People from diverse backgrounds sometimes have difficulty recognizing one another as fellow citizens in the community of reason. This is so, frequently, because actions and motives require, and do not always receive, a patient effort of interpretation. The task of world citizenship requires the would-be world citizen to become a sensitive and empathic interpreter. Education at all ages should cultivate the capacity for such interpreting” (p. 63).

Alongside the pedagogical meaning of education to tolerance, such as the acceptance of ideologies, faiths, systems of life different from one's own and recognition of their validity (Ricciardi Ruocco, 1962, p. 42), we must needs consider the problematic transition, which shifts the analysis from a religious plane to a secular plane. Thus, in noting the great variety of forms and expression of tolerance, we see how their vastness merges into new interpretive contexts that adopt, as binding, not so much the sharing of

pluralism as the state of the multicultural society, a challenge to tolerance and promise of tolerance. This way, the subject of multiculturalism, examined by Michael Walzer (1997, pp. 147-153), as a political arena of both economic and social equality, represents an opening for the debate, so as to recognise how many obstacles there still are prior to the realisation of a project, in which we can coexist in full respect of the human dignity of each and every person. The nerve centre of this tolerance is the recognition of the differences of groups through the proposition of programmes for putting aside those possible new discriminations of an economic nature that, in the name of poverty, lead us to again give voice to our intellectual duty to choose the good and shun the bad.

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