

Thinking Allowed

Tolerance – some thoughts

Are we a tolerant society? What do controversies such as wearing of the burka or the crucifix or whether it is permissible to make offensive comments about someone's religion or culture say about tolerance? When student debating societies do not allow certain groups to speak because they support an unacceptable or opposing view – what does this say about tolerance?

How do we understand tolerance? Some see it as a reluctance to judge or have strong views about behaviour of others which can end up as indifference. Some see it as permissiveness. Others see it as being able to disagree strongly but continue to be friends. **What makes it possible to disagree strongly and continue as friends?**

Tolerance is a close companion of liberty and freedom. *Without tolerance we cannot be free, we cannot follow and act on our conscience, we cannot exercise our moral autonomy nor pursue our own road seeking the truth.*

'Tolerance' became prominent when it started referring to tolerance of different religions in the seventeenth century. With fierce disagreements between religious groups, tolerance was needed otherwise society would not survive.

As religion became less influential, tolerance was called for in the free expression of opinions, beliefs and behaviour associated with individual conscience and lifestyles. In this way tolerance is essential for freedom and demands that we accept the right of people to live according to beliefs and opinions that are different, sometimes fiercely opposed, to ours.

Tolerance does not demand that we 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 views.

It is important to respect the person who may be promoting a view with which we disagree, but we do not always have to respect the opinion. It is not always easy to make this distinction.

We would not want to respect a person's opinion if it were prejudice that belittles other people.

Voltaire: *I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it. Do we agree?*

One of the ways that knowledge develops and insights into truths are gained, is through rejecting and marginalizing views and sentiments founded on superstition and prejudice.

Laws concerning religious toleration emerged before other forms of democratic freedom were recognised. Tolerance is required before freedom and liberty can work. **Are there limits to tolerance? If we limit tolerance are we limiting freedom?**

Tolerance is risky. The freedom to speak and pursue knowledge has a habit of going off in unexpected directions. Risk-taking and freedom are mutually reinforcing values. *When a society discourages people from taking risks, risk-taking becomes equated with irresponsible behaviour and precaution becomes a virtue.* In a risk averse society (like ours) it is less likely that there will be new discoveries. If people make mistakes (something that happens with risk-taking), then the consequences can be dire. We live in a society that permits everything but forgives nothing.

Tolerance means that everybody should be expected to be offended at times. Are there areas of life where this should not happen? **Are there taboos – topics that should not be open to criticism or debate? Do we lose or gain by having taboos?**

Tolerance matters because it allows human beings a degree of influence over the unfolding of their destiny. It provides an opportunity for people to be themselves...to gain an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. Tolerance is a virtue because it takes human beings very seriously, recognising that without freedom to err people can never acquire the freedom to discover truths. It is always difficult to tolerate disagreeable beliefs and customs. That is why the battle for tolerance is part of an endless struggle for freedom.

Sentences in italics are lifted from Frank Furedi, *On Tolerance*.

Further quotations on tolerance

Resolve to be tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and the wrong. Sometime in life you will have been all of these

George Washington Carver

Never judge someone by the way they look, or a book by the way it's covered. For inside those tattered pages there's a lot to be discovered.

Stephen Cosgrove

The highest result of education is tolerance.

Helen Keller

Men build too many walls and not enough bridges.

Joseph Newton

If I do not believe as you believe it proves that you do not believe as I believe, and that is all that it proves.

Thomas Paine

Summary of questions:

1. Are we a tolerant society?
2. How do we understand tolerance?
3. What makes it possible to disagree strongly and continue as friends?
4. *I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.*
Do we agree?
5. Are there limits to tolerance? Can tolerance be a bad thing?
6. If we limit tolerance are we limiting freedom?
7. Are there taboos – topics that should not be open to criticism or debate? Do we lose or gain by having taboos?