Unable to be tolerant?

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Today we have come together to talk about tolerance. However, we are not having a discussion on tolerance because tolerance is on the increase. The reason why UNESCO is organizing numerous events on tolerance can rather be seen as a reaction to intolerance, to the threat of growing nationalism, racism, xenophobia and fundamentalism threatening mankind worldwide. In one of the papers published by UNESCO I read: "It's a fact that most people consider themselves tolerant until challenged to their 'tolerance threshold': the one nationality, group, mode of behaviour that they simply cannot tolerate. We need to think more about tolerance because intolerance is on the increase and because extreme intolerance kills." But why is it so difficult to be tolerant, especially in times of rapid change, when we increasingly need tolerance?

1. Degrees of Tolerance

What do we understand by tolerance? Apparently, we almost all have something different in mind. A defininition given by UNESCO describes tolerance as the basic, minimum quality of social relationship refraining from violence and force. But who tolerates whom and why? Here, we can see big differences in terms of history and conception.

A closer look at the diversity of tolerance concepts reveals different degrees of progressing tolerance:

1. the pragmatic calculating one

2. the endured passive one

3. the active interfering one

1. Derived from Latin "tolerare" tolerance originally means "to endure a burden or to let sth. happen". This meaning of endurance is what today most people understand by tolerance. Starting point for the development of tolerance was the relation between a strong and a weak party, between a ruler granting tolerance and a - usually religious - minority asking for tolerance. Here, the reason for tolerance was of a pragmatic calculating kind, since social and economic advantages gained out of practicing tolerance seemed to be higher than the price of suppression. Such pragmatic calculation could also be decisive at the end of a war led between two almost equally strong enemies, who were aware that they had rather endure the enemy's rights, since the price of intolerance would have been too high.

2. It was during the Enlightenment that a new interpretation of tolerance gained acceptance - even though without replacing the old pragmatic calculating one: All people must be tolerated because everybody has a right to it. Every person must be granted the freedom of being different, for it is a human right. And it is people's task to tolerate the outcome of the others' freedom.

This second concept of tolerance thus also considers the acceptance of the others with their right to be different. Acceptance does of course not mean to take over, but to respect the other religion, way of life and cultural phenomena while having in mind that a different lifestyle has the same rights as one's own.

3. Alois Wierlacher's interpretation of tolerance even goes beyond this concept: "Tolerance does not only mean 'to endure' and 'to let happen', it also means 'to support' and 'to make bearable'. The word 'tolerance' cannot be reduced to an endured passive attitude ..., it is an active construction of human reality".

This concept reflects the concept of positive tolerance as understood by UNESCO. Tolerance is far more than the mere absence of intolerance. It implies our involvement in creating an environment in which tolerance is possible.

We can conclude from this short overview that the central question is not only whether somebody is tolerant, but also how tolerant he/she is. However, in view of rising intolerance we should ask ourselves whether it is adequate to criticize the tolerance of " the first step"? Is it realistic to expect tolerance going beyond this?

2. Competence of Tolerance and Culture of Tolerance

Tolerance cannot be taken for granted. Its practice is difficult, and the lack of tolerance is the problem. Which are the prerequesites for an environment in which tolerance becomes possible?

Tolerance is often qualified as a virtue, a virtue of democracy or a virtue of pluralism. This already suggests the moral efforts going along with tolerance: Tolerance must be practiced in spite of our inclinations, whishes or feelings. It is not in our nature; it is the result of a learning process. People must be enabled to be tolerant, and this ability can only be developed by someone who is self-assured.

The more self-assured we are, the less we feel threatened by foreigners. The more stable and balanced our self-esteem is, the less we feel the need to devalue others in order to enhance our own status.

Thus, the opposite of a widespread stereotype comes true. Tolerance is not based on weakness, but on strength. Tolerance is a result of relative strength, intolerance of relative weakness. The ability to accept the others and their differences requires above all self-esteem and a strong personality, because the main point is to be able to accept, not to be forced to endure.

However, the question how tolerant the individual can be does not only depend on his personal competence, but also on the culture of tolerance in his society. A culture of tolerance must not be understood as an ideal of tolerance, but rather as collectively shared patterns of orientation for tolerance given in a society. Such a culture of tolerance - showing different national and regional profiles - is based on:

- historic experiences with minorities reflected in the collective memory
- collective learning processes about the social price of intolerance, which have left their traces in the political awareness
- the "offer of identities" given by politicians
- the conception of a "defensive tolerance" reflecting experiences with the abuse of tolerance by the enemies of tolerance.

Two preconditions are thus indispensable for tolerance, i.e. 1. tolerance must be prepared as individual competence 2. tolerance must be developed as a collective cultural pattern.

3. The "Tolerance Gap"

Which circumstances for tolerance have changed in times of social transformations? Let me point to three "pushes" of change: 1. post-socialist pluralism 2. (post) modern individualism and 3. international migration.

First: The breakdown of socialism in Eastern Europe has brought about an expansion of political, ethnic and cultural pluralism worldwide. The abolition of political and cultural borders has lead to changes of an unexpected extent. This increase in diversity also affects the field of political culture, where it leads to a growing demand for democratic competence to deal with this new diversity. More emphasis is now put on tolerance, since it is seen as an indispensable virtue of democracy (Fetscher). After the end of the big fights about ideologies during the Cold War the suspicion of a so-called "tolerance ideology" has gradually vanished. It has become clear that tolerance can be more than its ideological instrumentalization.

However, very often the new freedoms are not experienced as enriching and freeing, but as

confusing and alienating. The experience of an unprecedented diversity is accompanied by the feeling that there have never been more unknown and strange phenomena. Intolerant reactions in form of nationalism, xenophobia and fundamentalism gain ground.

Second: Also long established democracies are still undergoing processes of transformation. Movements of individualism have not yet ended; experiences with differences and ambivalence still increase. Does the optimistic opinion that these processes will lead to a new "postmodern tolerance" come true? Do we have a development of a postmodern mentality with an habitual attitude of tolerance towards difference and ambivalence?

The increase of choices is again accompanied by an increase of uncertainties. For we are spoilt for choice. This means that freedoms are always ambivalent and today they are often risky. This is why modernization is still overshadowed by antimodern movements envisaging the closing of an open society as well as the exclusion of the unknown and of the foreigners from this society.

Third: Recent changes have also brought about new processes of migration. Most European societies are characterized by new multiethnic and multicultural profiles. The fact that we increasingliy have to deal with foreigners and unknown cultures puts new demands on tolerance.

However, there is no sufficient increase in tolerance compared to the multicultural changes in societies. Multicultural diversity is often not seen as an enrichment, but as a threat leading to defensive strategies of the "closed mind", to manifestations of intolerance like xenophobia and racism, to nationalism and fundamentalism.

On balance, we can observe something that might be called a "tolerance gap": On the one hand more tolerance is asked for, on the other hand it seems to become more and more difficult to be tolerant.

4. Tolerance threshold

When we speak of tolerance we must not forget about intolerance. Those who ask for more tolerance should know about the reasons for intolerance. I do not understand intolerance in the sense of intolerance against suppression and exploitation or in the sense of self-defense against a law of repressive tolerance proclaiming that the exploited and dispossessed should tolerate their living conditions. No, when I speak of intolerance I only refer to it in the sense of refusing the human right to be different, of intolerance towards foreigners and towards everything that is deviant.

The different explanations offered by social scientists about the various manifestations of intolerance begin to be almost confusing. We begin to wonder who is responsible for intolerance? Are the minorities or the majorities to blame for violent conflicts? Is it the demands of foreigners or the conception of native people that causes xenophobia? Is intolerance a consequence of economic and social crises or is it a result of an authoritarian personality? Or can we find the key to an explanation of intolerance in modernization, which evokes new uncertainties?

An innovative approach to explain intolerance - especially in times of rapid and diverse transformations - is offered by the stress theory. It is social stress that makes citizens susceptible to intolerance. Tolerance thresholds can thus be considered stress thresholds: The higher the social stress, the lower the probability that stressed citizens act in a tolerant way.

In post communist countries the threshold of intolerance is currently quite low, as here the stress constellation is particularly unfavourable. On the one hand, transformations have brought about a cumulative confrontation wiht so far unknown challenges: economic competition, ideological and political uncertainties and multicultural differences. On the other hand, citizens were not enough prepared to accept these changes as challenges. Many citizens feel overtaxed, for they lack the competence and resources to handle this stress.

However, a fourth categorie of social and political change gives cause for moderate hope, since here - after a long time of violent intolerance - the chances of initial steps of a tolerance development become apparent. I am talking about the efforts to achieve peace in South Africa, Northern Ireland and Israel. In these cases, tolerance has developed out of the realization that the price of intolerance is too high! Pragmatic tolerance is the result of a learning process that had required many sacrifices. Of course, there is always the danger of regression. There is no parallel and steady development of a competence of tolerance and a culture of competence in these societies neither. However, initial steps have been made.

5. Prospects for Tolerance

Pedagogical efforts to promote education for tolerance - especially within the activities of UNESCO and of the European Council - have been quite impressive. Unsatisfactory, however, is their transfer into the classroom. The very often lacking coordination and networking of similar programmes and projects has unproductive effects. Furthermore, differences and similarities between education for democracy, education for human rights, for tolerance or intercultural education remain unclear. This is likely to cause avoidable confusion when teachers are confronted with this diversity.

A common aspect of the majority of these programmes and initiatives is the assumption that citizens with a balanced self-esteem do not develop the need to exclude, devalue or attack others. They are capable of tolerance. The central task must therefore be to give our future citizens more competence. Preventive measures must prepare citizens for the diversity and confusion of our time. Imparting a strong and balanced self-esteem is one of the most important competences we know.

A decisive approach to the development of tolerance is the so-called "multiperspectivity". "Multiperspectivity" means to be able and willing to regard a situation from different perspectives. This ability should be learnt at an early stage so that the willingness to take over another perspective will not be blocked by prejudice and fear. Precondition and part of "multiperspectivity" is the knowledge of one's own perspective. The awareness of one's own position reveals what we fear of the other - the foreign - person.

"Multiperspectivity" is a strategy of understanding, not of conformity. This must be true for both sides. A change of the perspective must neither prepare the assimilation of a minority nor should it result in stereotyped images of friendship with everything that is "unknown". Xenophobia must not be replaced by xenophilia. This would only present an exchange of prejudice, but not a basis for sustainable tolerance.

"Multiperspectivity" does not mean: "Everything goes". Tolerance is based on human rights! This implies a mutual acceptance and recognition of the other as a person having equal values and equal rights. Based on this recognition the difference in the perspectives can be considered. However, this difference must not question the fundament of human rights. No tolerance of intolerance.

The ability to change the perspective also requires the capacity to understand in how far the other perspective can be seen as a reaction to one's own behaviour. It is also important to ask in how far another person's intolerance can be identified as a reaction to one's own - interpreted or misinterpreted - behaviour. This intolerance could then be overcome through a change in one's own behaviour.

It would certainly be an abstract utopia to hope that we could live without intolerance. A world whithout those circumstances provoking intolerance seems to be impossible. However, there are numerous ways of reducing intolerance and promoting tolerance. Sometimes it can already save lives when we accept at least the "tolerance of the first step".