

Dutch Tolerance: Something to Learn from?

Written by Uwe Becker

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In the age of intensified globalization and migration, societies are increasingly confronted with problems of integration and peaceful coexistence of religiously or otherwise ethnically different groups – particularly of groups identifying themselves with Western traditions on the one hand and the world of Islam on the other. Tolerance is an important element to meet these requirements.

There are two – at least two – varieties of tolerance. One is where deviant beliefs and practices are accepted (*tolerated*) by the dominant segment of society, even if the latter judges the former as inferior and could repress them. The other one is where different and deviant beliefs and practices are considered equal – where tolerance has the meaning of openness. In both cases, crucial questions regard the limits of tolerance and how the limits have to be determined. In fact, this is the most important question in the entire debate on tolerance as not everything can be tolerated. Are there any criteria for setting limits and determining who the authority is to do that? And, is tolerance a question of power? Finally, can we learn anything from the experience of Netherlands in this matter?

Today in the context of a Dutch government depending on the anti-Islam party of Geert Wilders (PVV), the question might appear inappropriate. Wilders' PVV, representing about a fifth of the electorate, is the third party in the current legislation period and posits Western traditions fundamentally in opposition to a generalized Islam. What is more Wilders personally does not stop insulting Muslims who, for him, “come from the desert” and “are backward,” with the male Muslim juveniles generally denigrated by him as “rabble”.^[1]

The Netherlands has, however, a history of tolerance for which it is famous, and in *World Value* as well as *Eurobarometer* surveys the country has scored high on tolerant attitudes. It is a country where minorities have always been an important part of the population, where integration has been managed pragmatically, and where violence between religious or otherwise ideologically divided groups has never been significant. The Netherlands also was the home of tolerance philosophers such as Desiderius Erasmus, Baruch Spinoza, and Hugo Grotius (De Groot). To some degree, the Dutch situation has been comparable to the emirate and later caliphate of Cordoba (Andalusia) in the 9th and the 10th centuries, where Christians, Muslims, and Jews lived peacefully together and all contributed to a uniquely flourishing culture.

After the Reformation and the subsequent turmoil in the 16th and 17th centuries, the northern Netherlands (as distinct from the southern Spanish Netherlands that later became Belgium) was transformed into the predominantly protestant Dutch Republic (and in the 19th century into the Dutch constitutional monarchy). In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Republic became the new home of religious minorities from France, Portugal, and the Spanish Netherlands. These minorities – Calvinists, Huguenots, and Jews – had been repressed by the catholic absolutism of their countries of origin, but could freely live in the Dutch Republic. This was also true for the often Catholic “guest workers” from regions east of the Republic and, not to forget, the large Catholic minority which was concentrated in the south of the country (that had a special status).

The dominant Protestants did not accept Catholics – their enemies in the Reformation and in the war against Spain – and Jews as equals in the sense of the second definition of tolerance, but they tolerated them in the sense of the first definition and thus allowed them to practice their religion – even if the Catholics had to hide their churches in places like Amsterdam. This indulgence seems not to have been guided by any high principle of tolerance, but by

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pragmatism: Foreigners, whatever their religion, were good for the economy, and the same was true for peaceful coexistence instead of conflict. Moreover, elite Dutch merchants had learned to bargain and negotiate and become used to apply these practices also in politics. In pragmatic politics, nobody owns the truth; what is true has to be agreed upon, and when an agreement cannot be reached, it must still be possible to coexist according to the principle of live and let live.

There is no reason to idealize pragmatism and tolerance of the Dutch Republic, but in comparative terms they have been characteristic features of this country in a European context, where repression and violence were the order of the day. Dutch elite pragmatism also came to the fore when fundamentalism took hold of the main religious segments of Dutch society in the 19th century and, in the early 20th century, gave way to the period of “pillarization” when the Catholic, Protestant, and secularized segments of society lived apart together in their own worlds of networks and organizations. High-level pragmatism is still applied in the Dutch drugs policy and with respect to, for example, the small fundamentalist Christian party SGP (with one seat in the parliament) which does not allow women to have a formal position in the party’s organization. This party violates the first, egalitarian and anti-discrimination, article of the Dutch Constitution. Trials have been initiated by women’s organizations and the Dutch government is criticized and blamed by the United Nations as well as the European Court of Justice for not suing the SGP, but it is still tolerated. The implicit message to women, who want to become politically active, is to join a different party. Also, the few Christian schools that might not give access to homosexual teachers are tolerated on the basis of the Constitution’s article 13, which codifies the freedom of education and thus partially opposes the anti-discrimination article 1.

What we see is that Dutch tolerance does not bring about perfect solutions. All the examples point to debatable developments. They show, however, attempts to arrange majority (or dominant) positions with minority positions without imposing the former on the latter by the majority principle or any alternative exercise of power. This practice is at the very heart of pragmatism in majority-minority affairs. Its point of departure is that there is no objective truth in normative questions – even the *law* is not undisputable – and that the use of pure power has to be avoided because it might undermine social peace.

The danger of pragmatism lies in relativism. So, if one wants to prevent relativism the question of the limits of tolerance at the same time is the question of the limits of pragmatism. Pragmatism sometimes violates or ignores the law, universalism – even Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative that any action should be based on a maxim that should have the quality to become universalized[2] – and the principle of equal treatment. The limits of pragmatism as well as tolerance should, at least in the Western world, be set by the same principles the pragmatic approach sometimes violates, particularly by those of political and ideological freedom – including freedom of speech – equality within a given jurisdiction (i.e. country, community, company, and the like), the rule of non-discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, religion, race, and gender. These principles have been goals of a centuries-long struggle, including milestones such as the American War of Independence and the French Revolution, and become dominant principally since the 1960s. They represent the identity of modern Western society and are the basis of democracy.

Perhaps one can even maintain that these principles of freedom and equality, together with the Enlightenment and some degree of secularization, define the West. Christianity, by contrast, is just one of the three monotheistic religions, historically as male-dominated as Islam and Judaism in the common core of its Catholic, Orthodox and numerous Protestant varieties. It is not fundamentally different from them, but has changed its face several times. The separation of religion and state, which too has only fully materialized in recent times, is also basically a Western idea, but not a feature of Christianity as a religion. This separation stems from the historic circumstances that the pope settled in the capital of the Roman Empire, which was surrounded after its decline by a large number of territorial rulers with whom he, violently or peacefully, had to come to terms.

Pragmatically violating the principles of freedom and equality should only be acceptable when it offers an exit route for those who would be the victims of or otherwise disadvantaged by this violation. Women who cannot get a political career in the Dutch political party SGP because they are women have such an exit route. They can indeed join another party. Something similar is true for the homosexual teacher who cannot get a job at certain Christian schools. Both cases are examples that meet the first definition of tolerance: the majority/the powerful accept the practices of a minority although they consider these practices wrong (and, at least in the case of the examples, even codify them).

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Let's now, however, go to the current situation of large Muslim minorities in the Western countries. Pragmatically, these countries should not have problems in tolerating religious symbols such as headscarves in the public sphere – even if they act on the basis of the state-religion division – let alone in private life. Those Muslim women who do not like it or interpret it as expression of female subjugation have the exit route of not wearing the headscarf and this exit route, which relates to the central Western principle of individual freedom, has to be protected. This protection also means that parts and/or interpretations of the *Sharia* that deny the individual freedom of women and render them potential victims of male dominance cannot be tolerated. Where the *Sharia* law is interpreted this way, it does not offer an exit route to women.

And what about forbidding offenses against Islam – criticizing the *Quran*, publishing funny images of Prophet Muhammad as was done in the Danish cartoons or insulting Muslims and calling them “backward”? Could this pragmatically be justified? No, it would fundamentally violate the freedom of speech and offer no exit route. Pragmatism in this matter means that people interact respectfully, even if they think negatively of certain attributes of other individuals or groups. Pragmatism in this matter also means that those who feel offended react with restraint to offenders – although people who feel offended can always sue offenders at court or even respond by offending back. Calling for a *Jihad* against cartoonists or artists like the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh – who was murdered in 2004 because of refusing to show any respect for Islam and offending Muslims time and again – does not provide any solution whatever to the problem. Nor does it remove anti-Islam attitudes, but only deepens cleavages. After all and in a similar vein, minorities have also to accept and to respect the norms and habits of the majority.

A related and final question is whether pragmatism can be coalesced with religion. It can. There are examples of this, such as those found in the Dutch history or, to mention it once again, the emirate/caliphate of Cordoba a millennium ago. Pragmatism can hardly be integrated, however, with fundamentalism. Fundamentalism of whatever sort – Christian fundamentalism, Islamic fundamentalism, or even Enlightenment fundamentalism – is the greatest enemy of pragmatism. Pragmatism requires the acceptance, with limits, of cultural difference.

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Notes

[1] Wilders was sued in 2010 at a Dutch court for “sowing hatred”. In its judgment in 2011, however, the court rejected the accusation.

[2] In Kant's words, “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law.” (Quoted from Wikipedia: *Categorical Imperative*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Categorical_imperative)

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