

International Day for Tolerance

Open Lectures

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Tolerance or Ignorance

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[Video material](#)

Disclaimer

The word “Ignorance” in the title I have chosen to match “Tolerance”. I do not mean to create a contradiction between the two, but to identify.

Please conclude for yourself whether such was a right choice.

Context

In this address I will not refer to the US-elections, although some of my text comes from, or is inspired by related discussions. Let’s look at some contextual aspects:

Over the past weekend, I read in a Dutch newspaper an interview with an entrepreneur, who served different companies in several countries and returned to the Netherlands recently. Two quotes:

- “In 2000 I left a country I thought was progressive and tolerant. Where politicians did not demonise an entire shift of population for religious reasonsⁱ. I cannot understand it being possible, we’re talking about a million people with a Dutch passport. That’s what I worry about”
- “I notice too that we’ve become poorer. On the street you see many old cars, people who have lost their jobs.”

Another quote, I took from the Internet, from a report of a coach:

- F*ck you and your tolerance. I refuse to be tolerated. You tolerate *things*, not humans. People you *accept* for who they are – or not. And in that case we don’t talk.

And, the basis for my speaking, Article 1 of our Constitution:

- All persons in the Netherlands shall be treated equally in equal circumstances. Discrimination on the grounds of religion, belief, political opinion, race or sex or on any other grounds whatsoever shall not be permitted.

Stable, predictable, orderly.

Tolerance in the Netherlands. We’ve been famous for it, but is that a correct image?

Indeed we fought our war of independence in the 16th century for *tolerance* and *freedom of religion and of speech*, as well as for other freedoms, less relevant for now.

We hosted Protestants from neighbouring countries as we did Jews and Catholics.

So we did the agnostic Spinoza.

But still, our hospitality and tolerance was limited, as Descartes and Grotius experienced.

Burning at the stake, the usual medieval punishment for women supposed to be witches, was phased out pretty soon, but Sodomy was still punished traditionally in our Golden Age, as much as elsewhere in Europe. You could call us open minded, but inspired by the same biblical and traditional values as other European cultures.

In the 16th till 18th centuries we were known as a *sea faring nation*, in our Golden Age even as a global empire. Doing business with so many countries and people made us tolerant, accepting others for who they were, without really trying to understand them – because there was no direct need for it. *Nor* was there a direct will.

Our 1st King, in the early 19th century limited freedoms, and suppressed some stricter than mainstream Protestants, because they did not fit in his concept of society with a unified protestant church. Catholics only got full freedom in 2nd half of that century.

Pillarization

In late 19th and early 20th century we acquired full freedom for all – but in such a way that it lead to the concept of *pillarization*. We felt comfortable in a society divided along religious and political lines, *pillars* – Protestant (in several shades), Catholics, liberals, and socialists.

Take myself as an example. I'm thoroughbred Calvinist, the more orthodox variety of Protestantism. I was born in a maternity clinic of a protestant hospital, went to a protestant kindergarten, primary and secondary school, was – and still am- member of a Calvinist church. When my parents' growing family needed a new house in the sixties, they found one in a Roman Catholic bloc – and I had to get used to Roman Catholic friends, staying in my Protestant pillar.

This division in pillars – where the pillars' elites decided about all national issues, guaranteeing a peaceful existence for all the pillars' members, experienced its most extreme form in the first half of the 20th Century.

For conservatives among you it may sound like an attractive concept.

But imagine, you were a liberal – not in the political terms, but as a character, a 'libertine' – not fitting in any of the existing pillars. Sooner or later you might be an outcast.

Of course this was not *uniform*. In the Protestant North you found villages that were entirely Roman Catholic and in the Catholic South people from the North found employment in for instance coalmines. These same coalmines needed so many workers, that from countries like Italy, Yugoslavia and Spain families went up North. But all these families were Catholic again.

Unavoidably this model was severely tested after 2nd WW, and even more so in the late 60ies. *Traditional society crumbled*; *secularization* became a test for societal bonds, so long taken for granted. It was not only secularisation, but also beginning *globalization* that tested traditional societal patterns and feelings.

Predictability put to a test

We experienced *refugees*, first people who fled our former colony Indonesia, some of them being white, others mixed and some with really a different background. But they all spoke Dutch! Later came Hungarian, Czech, Greek political refugees. We could cope with all,

because the numbers were relatively small and our economy was growing fast in the post-war boom, fuelled with natural gas – and because they were Christian Europeans.

More and more we were tested with influxes of people with truly different backgrounds. First there were the *guest workers* – initially men only, living together in modest lodgings near textile factories and mills. Easy was the integration of many people from Surinam, or of Antilleans, seeking prosperity in the former colonial power. This was a familiar phenomenon in all former colonial powers in Europe and - for economic reasons - in Germany.

The test intensified. From the late *seventies*, the modest, lonely and sympathetic guest workers reunited with families, but went on living their own life, as Muslims, dressed according to their tradition and habits, bringing women, wearing headscarves and the like.

In the eighties we experienced an economic crisis. The character of the economy changed from agricultural and industrial to higher tech and service oriented. *Unemployment* hit the country, killing perspectives of original Dutch as much as of immigrants. This was the first test of our *perceived tolerance*. Another test was the 2nd and 3rd generation of the guest workers – children who were born and bred in the Netherlands, spoke Dutch as much as their parents' language and initially stayed loyal to their parents' belief. The families spent vacations in the original home countries and sometimes returned. The returnees still qualified for social support, even in rural Turkey or mountainous Morocco.

The test continued. From the early nineties a new flux of refugees arrived, now more massive than ever before. First there were the Yugoslavs and later massive numbers from around the world.

We noticed we had developed a concept of a *multicultural society* without ever discussing all its aspects, which prompted some intellectuals to question the concept of multicultural society. Was it sustainable? Or were we right at all?

Debate at last, Politics called to order

Did we really integrate the migrants, did we adapt to them being here?

Our schooling system knows freedom of choice, due to our pillarization. Statistics showed that 'white' children were sent to 'white' schools, for instance Catholic or Protestant, even when parents did not adhere to those views, but only not to go to public schools, that eventually turned 'black'.

We preached tolerance and acceptance, but practised segregation.

We preached multiculturalism, but practised separating cultures.

A solution was needed, but was not offered – yet.

We're talking 98, when a politician was convicted because his slogan was that 'when we're in power, we'll abolish multicultural society'. He was a lone wolf, despised by the establishment, isolated in Parliament.

As from 2001 confrontation intensified. We experienced 9/11. An articulate populist, who addressed issues more vocal and framed his message intellectually, became very popular in the wake of parliamentary elections. *He called the political elites 'bluff'*. A few weeks before the 2002 parliamentary elections, he was murderedⁱⁱ. His party entered parliament and even government. Another year later, a filmmaker and Muslim critic was murdered on the street in Amsterdam.

The fairy tale was over, which became visible in statistics. Over the years the Dutch still prove to be receptive to immigrants – but less than before and less than the Scandinavians; in general also Muslim immigrants are welcome. The Dutch feel well and have trust in institutions, the judiciary and parliament, although a bit less in politicians. But the general picture is not always reflected in practice. Acceptance of immigrants went down at grass roots level, between people, families, quarters.

Populism was there to stay and populist language became mainstream. Even the slogan, the politician was convicted for in 98.

He called ‘no *more* migrants’, the now very popular (populist) politician Geert Wilders now stands trial for ‘do you want *less* Moroccans?’

We needed new answers, a different policy mix, more understanding for peoples’ feelings.

Adjusted enforcement

Immigration policies have become very strict over the past years and both the screening and lodging has become an industry by itself.

Police have elaborated their policies. They have become painfully aware of the risk of ethnic profiling, they implement programmes to have more staff with an immigrant background and have elaborated the old concept of *community policing*, which means underlining the importance of the street- or neighbourhood cop, who can cope with potentially dissatisfied youth in less favourable areas.

This policy proves to be a success when compared to other European countries with respect to prevention of jihadism and terrorism.

But in the mean time also *politics* has to adjust. Politicians realized they need to address issues more concretely, address fears in society. We are now facing parliamentary elections again in March 17 and no one can shy away from the issue of tolerance anymore. And the issues become more concrete every day.

Should we for instance tolerate a Muezzin calling for prayer from a Mosque’s minaret? Even more concretely: should we tolerate Mosques at all, with or without minarets? The answer is: yes. *But also, should we – still – tolerate church bells calling for service, as they have done over centuries?*

Do we allow foreign funding of Muslim schools? The answer is: depends on type and quality of education and objectives of the funding. *But this also challenges us as a country to be open and transparent when promoting universal values.*

The Dutch public now discusses the acceptability of *Zwarte Piet*. This character, Black Pete, is assistant of Sinterklaas, the Dutch variety – or original - of Santa Claus. This usually is a white man or woman with black make-up. Many people, originating from former colonies and Africa see this figure as racist, but many others see him as a mythical figure, part of our history, without any reference to slavery or colonialism. Don’t take the children’s tradition away, they say. Commercial and Public TV took the lead to introduce alternatives, while politics is waiting for the outcome of a spontaneous societal debate. It confronts all of us with boundaries of tolerance: should I involve, am I confronted and addressed? *May ‘they’ raise the issue?*

Evaluation

Modern times are extremely demanding for all of us. Intellectuals and politicians had no eye for it for a number of years. They may not have sensed the public’s distress sufficiently. We

received some wake-up calls, including the referenda on the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005 and on the Association Agreement with Ukraine in 2016. *Do they mean that the once so open and sea faring nation has become afraid of being exposed?*

To my opinion not only globalization and immigration are detrimental for societal dissatisfaction. We also have to acknowledge societal changes, varying from *secularization to managerial government*.

As an elderly couple reflected on it in an interview recently:

“Cohesion disappeared and was replaced by control:

Someone looking into your figures replaced someone who looked into your eyes.

The church moved from centre to periphery – old-fashioned ‘first communion all inclusive’ is now tradable for ‘a trip to Eurodisney’. “

May be we all want an Open Society; but do we want it against all costs, giving up what has been dear to us over centuries?

The businessman I quoted in the beginning was wrong.

The Netherlands do not demonize one seventeenth of the population. But we have become more direct in the language we use, are more strict when it come to rights and obligations.

People at large appear still tolerant statistically, but less tolerant in individual situations. We should recognize that.

He also was wrong on our being rich or poor.

Indeed we know poor people in our society, food-for-free stores are to stay. *Negative.*

But we are also one of the richest industrialized countries, with high income-equality and outstanding social security. We know a flourishing civil society and one of the highest grades of volunteering, especially in churches – so the food-for-free stores are there to stay. *Positive!*

Tolerance as a concept and an attitude

Dutch citizens can no longer be ignorant and neither can politicians.

The facts are clear: we have a society with *many* cultures, but we have chosen at last not to be a *multicultural* society. Society is now regarded to be Dutch, with respect for variety of descent. That is a call for action for all concerned.

We may ignore neither facts nor people. We have to recognize both. Society calls for that.

But we also have to accept that we are all different; think and behave differently.

Old days’ predictability has gone; daily we are confronted with new people and new challenges.

We could test concept and practice by asking ourselves:

Is being tolerant similar to:

- Accepting the *fact* that someone else is, acts or thinks the way he/she does?
- Respecting *another* even when being, acting or thinking different?
- Understanding *someone* for being what he/she is, his/her thoughts, acts, dress?

Some final reflections

Even in a rules-based society we still have to decide for ourselves on tolerating the other. Governments, companies and NGOs in the meantime have to accept the human being as a unique individual and his convictions and traditions.

It's the people stupid!

Both as a subject and an object:

- I told you I come from a Calvinist background, which defines my views up to a large extend.
- I remember vividly the first black person visiting our house around 1970. My mother described him as “a very civilized young man”.
- I also remember walking along the kitchen window of a Surinam family when preparing for my job in diplomacy – the smell of their spicy food was quite irritating – *depending on my mood.*

As a management conclusion:

On my first posting I learned to appreciate white peoples' anger. Sitting in their well maintained garden plus swimming pool, earned after years of hard work, they had to tolerate their newly arrived black neighbours planting maize in what used to be a beautiful garden.

These people's irritation was both wrong and understandable, but was it avoidable?

ⁱ He refers to the mainly immigrant Muslim population

ⁱⁱ By a Dutchman who regarded the politicians views dangerous for society.