On Tolerance and Acceptance of the Other

In this text, the problem of tolerance is discussed in the light of recent works of Umberto Eco and Stefan Afloroaei. The author argues that in the case of tolerance, the success lies not in *tolerating* the other, (not even in the weaker sense of the word), but rather in *accepting* him. The acceptance of the Other is the complete and powerful meaning of tolerance. *Acceptance* ends where the very presence of the concept of *tolerance* is undermined and compromised by its history of colonialism and exploitation. Therefore, the primary solution to understand and apply tolerance is the *recognition of alterity*, in an inner and outer meaning alike.

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In one of his essays published in *El Pais,* Umberto Eco considered a mere gaffe minister Berlusconi's statement on the superiority of Western culture, a minor fact, in other words. "What is not minor and what should preoccupy us all: politicians, religious leaders and educators alike, is that some expressions and even impassioned articles legitimated these declarations and transformed them into subjects that captivate the teenager's mind and possibly lead him to rash conclusions as dictated by the moments' feeling"[1]. To hate, dissension, and intolerance, eventually.

Basically, Umberto Eco is right. The mass media today has a colossal influence. It creates leaders (false ones at times), it demolishes statues, and changes men-

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talities. True indeed, in the process of taking over and commenting upon them the premier's words may lead to confusion and intolerance. Still, I am not willing to excuse the Italian Prime Minister as Eco has. His was no minor gaffe. As a matter of fact, Berlusconi's statement is extremely important on account of the current political and symbolic position of the initiator. A public statement, be it false (as the example above) or not, becomes real by the very fact that it is interpreted as real (the celebrated sociological theorem of Thomas).

Unfortunately, I am under the impression that Silvio Berlusconi has not reconsidered his belief by admitting the mistake. He continues as a prisoner of the stereotypes of the Enlightenment and of progressive origins, which regard the West as the hub of the universe, with all the other religions, cultures and civilizations as mere appendices to the European history. I do not think that Berlusconi has graduated – as quite a few European politicians have indeed - any course in the history of religions or cultural anthropology. Then I can only assume that he lacks a profound knowledge of the Islam as well as the culturally activated propensity to understand and tolerate his Muslim fellows. Perhaps it is not far from the truth to say that Silvio Berlusconi is through his famous statement the prototype of the Western politician. Pragmatic, tactful and diplomatic, but hardly knowledgeable in issues of the philosophy of alterity and the social imaginary.

The public persona of Berlusconi embodies the weaker form of the concept of *tolerance*. For him, "to tolerate" means that the parties involved are necessarily situated on different positions. From this perspective, X in his capacity of Western politician tolerates the other, because X is *a priori* invested with a special status, a superior one by necessity, and the other, whether part of the minority or not, lives by his consent only. X *tolerates* in the sense that he *accepts* the proximity of the other's residence in the community. Still, X does not necessarily honor the other, all the less impart the coordinates of his "superior" culture. His logo reads as follows: *By the very fact that the Other is different from myself, he is inferior to me. To a certain degree, I can tolerate him, but I needn't bear his cold smelly breath down my nape. Keeping the distance is compulsory*[2] . Still, the risks of this weaker form of tolerance can be quite vehement. In the extreme, they might lead to intolerance and crime.

The sequences of this malefic intellectual mechanism are hardly a novelty in history. To start with, due to its differentiated status, the Other is beheld as charged with negativity. This intolerability may easily pass into discourse and into actions. In one of his splendid texts, Stefan Afloroaei illustrates the road from "being different" to "being considered the adversary" by different situations drawn from history[3] . Stefan Afloroaei exemplifies the negative load of the *alter* by using the Latin equivalent, where *alter* means *only the other*, *the adversary, the opposite,* etc. Moreover, in public confrontation *altera pars* (the other party) is suggestively associated with *avocatus diaboli*. Also, *altera avis* (the other bird) refers to imminent misfortunes and stands for the implicit evil of the time. Not to mention *alter homo*, equated to *the barbarian,* hardly a chance associa-

tion. His social condition is often that of the foreign wanderer, the plebeian and the servant, the insane and the damned.

Oftener than not, the encounter with the Other takes the shape of the relation between the nomad and the sedentary. This is the case of Borges' *Histories on Horsemen* and of the binary, classical by now, "European-Indian" in *The Discovery of America* by Tzvetan Todorov. The famous Night of Saint Bartholomew, alongside the dark September 11, have become apparent indications of the demonization of the Other and of an impressive failure of tolerability.

Today, all these can not be imputed to either one side. To a certain degree, politicians, citizens, public institutions and the media alike are to be blamed. The media have their own instruments to cultivate and to perpetuate some dichotomous social relations that in certain contexts may favor an increase in intolerance. This is possible when crime becomes symbolic through stigmatization, manipulation and intolerance. The specific reference is to such Manichaean pairs as "we – they", "white - black", "Christians – non Christians", "civilized – barbarian", "Europeans – Orientals," etc. One such element copiously used is *the stereotype*. The term entered the Humanistic Sciences in the 1930s. Today, it circumscribes the assembly of rules and attributes of which some represent personality traits. In the media, the stereotype takes the form of a synthetic and necessarily simplified presentation of the quotidian events.

In the quick pace of events today, journalists do not pause to analyze and to understand what is happening. Perhaps they are not sufficiently trained to do so. Under these circumstances, the journalists fall into a trap infinitely more injurious to us all: they merely recount, fully persuaded that nothing else needs to be done to facilitate understanding. This explains the manner in which the Other (be he Christian, Protestant, Oriental, or Muslim) is depicted in the Romanian media. Availing oneself of the description only of the alterity, one can not accede to the truth of the alterity, to its symbolic and religious meanings. This is where the stereotype intervenes as "the expression itself of the collective knowledge that claims validity in any historical circumstance"[4]. What was said yesterday about my fellow, who is different and thus tolerated, is perfectly valid today, and will be tomorrow, too. It should not come as a surprise, then, that terrorism is "Arab", fundamentalism is "Islamic," and despotism is unquestionably "Eastern" to most of us. These "old remnants" (in F. Tönnies's terms), handed down generations via prosaic communication are kept alive and potent in our minds and by our social conduct. Just as textbook science, they stand for a truth as formulated, among others, by Thierry Hentsch[5]. According to him, "the collective imaginary of the West about the East (especially the Muslim East), expresses much more truth about the subject (he who sees) than about the object (he who is seen)"[6]. In other words, it says much more about our deficient tolerance for the Other than we are feel in-

clined to understand and accept, and infinitely less about the object of out tolerance.

I argue that in the complicated alchemy of tolerance one should focus on those who tolerate. The success lies not in *tolerating* the other, (not even in the weaker sense of the word), but rather in *accepting* him. The acceptance of the Other is the complete and powerful meaning of tolerance. *Acceptance* ends where the very presence of the concept of *tolerance* is undermined and compromised by its history of colonialism and exploitation. Umberto Eco considers the acceptance of the Other as the great bargain of cultural anthropology today.

Cultural anthropology "has been developed with the intention of amplifying the *culpability* of the West towards the others, with the *Others* particularly defined as barbarians, as societies without history or as primitive communities"[7]. By paraphrasing Mircea Eliade, I argue that a definite therapy for the Western culpability is the creative hermeneutics and the history of religions. Why? Because the mentalities and the life styles of the others, be they exotic or not, are ultimately religious. The knowledge of religions, of symbols and of the sacred rituals is yet the key to understanding and acceptance. This is also valid for the cases where the motives of the modern West are not repentance and remorse over past history nor a detached curiosity for the Other's culture and life style.

Eliade's considerations need to be updated. Today, the problem is not only to accept the Other as one's equal yet different, but also to ascertain him as a free citizen in one's own home. Yesterday, "*the anthropologist said that one should respect the others' life style as long as they keep their places*"[8]. Today, they have moved into ours and we ask legitimately if the rules still hold. At this point I subscribe to Eco's simple answer: *it depends*. I can accept/tolerate the Other to pierce his lips, nose, navel or eyebrows. I can accept/tolerate him to practice circumcision or rogation five times a day. Yet, in Eco's terms, I can hardly tolerate western ID cards with photos of women wearing a veil, the refusal of blood transfusion for sick children, or the wish of the last cannibal in New Guinea to have a barbecued child for every Sunday lunch, to use Eco's exemplification.

Everywhere in the world there are written and unwritten rules that can not be disregarded. An exaggerated enforcement may lead, paradoxically, to a *dictatorship of the minority* and to a reversal of the tolerance ratio. In such situations, the tolerated could very well be a representative of the mainstream: heterosexual, orthodox, and invariably tributary to the classic testamentary models and the *establishment*. The only solution I see to avoid the occurrence of these inverted replicas of the world is to respect the established mores. (Cases where a fundamentalist or a totalitarian regime sets up the standards are by definition exempt from the above rules).

Despite the mistakes it has made, the West is fully entitled to this. As Eco emphasized, the West "invested money and energy in the study of the habits and customs of the others". In contrast, the others have never been permitted to study the habits and customs of the

West, except in schools abroad under white management. There are, however, a few cases when the West did accept the others to study at Oxford or Paris. Everybody knows what happened afterwards: the graduates returned home to organize fundamentalist movements sympathizing with their co-nationals who had not enjoyed the same educational opportunities. Furthermore, there is a history of intellectuals who studied alongside the English and then went on to struggle for the independence of India"[9]. Such history has now taken different shapes today. Muslims graduate from the Western Universities and then fight against the American politics, against the atheist West through its own instruments. This in particular is regarded as the will of non-Western countries to "enter history" by means of fundamentalism and intolerance.

All the motive fundamentalists may invoke aside – regardless of their color and their faith – one thing is obvious: the intolerance of the other is the exterior and visible sign of an interior schizophrenia. Any authentic encounter of the alterity entails the scenario of a *descensus ad inferos*. It is a symbolic death, followed by a renewal and the encounter with the Other within oneself. In Hegel's terms, our conscience "expulses the alterity violently"[10], but at the same time, by the same exercise, the conscience sustains the alterity. The conscience maintains and updates the alterity in its negative forms. The reason might be the necessary venting of tensions and frustrations accumulated over time. It is the theme of *pharmakos,* in an exemplary analysis by Renè Girard in his work.

It is only evident that the odyssey of alterity should be spiritually fruitful. The alterity demands a regular expulsion followed by the assumption of an alter ego. The process underlies the existence of every individual or community. This *back and forth* mechanism might as well be taken for a necessary existential therapy. You succeed in knowing yourself better through the faces of the Other. Moreover, when this spiritual circuit is blocked, the ego enters schizophrenia. All links with the diversity of the world are severed, and the latter is demonised. This is exactly how the Ego fully illustrates the ultimately negative aspect, the intolerance.

For this reason I believe that the primary solution for tolerance is the *recognition of alterity*, interior and exterior alike. This should be the first and foremost bargain of the education. I recall an example by Umberto Eco. „The Academie Universelle des Cultures has a special department in charge of creating authentic material on different topics (color, religion, usage, customs, etc). The material is intended for educators in all countries willing to educate their colleagues to accept the people who are different from themselves"[11]. How? Firstly, children should not be told the lie that all are equal. Children keenly realize that some of their neighbors and colleagues are not equal to them because of the difference in skin color, eye shape, eating habits, and/or not taking the Eucharist. Moreover, they shouldn't be told that all are God's creatures, either. The animals are God's creatures too. Still, nobody has ever seen a goat at the desk, teaching orthography. This is why children should be told that human beings are very different one

from another. One should also explain thoroughly what the differences consist in. And all this in order to make pupils understand that differences should be a source of spiritual fulfillment"[12]. A source of tolerance and even acceptance of the Other. Developing a good relationship with the alterity will then complete this pedagogical exercise in the alternative understanding of the difference.

The following lesson may be then to *discover the similarities with the Other*. With children, it is not easy to justify the existence of similarities in bodies, interests and religions. One should beware of the dangers of syncretism. Only after understanding the hidden play of similarities and of dissimilarities, one can pursue tolerance and acceptance. This is the great lesson in history that should be learned at Kabul or Bagdad. But who knows? Maybe some of us played truant when it was taught!

Notes

* Translated by Maria Boariu

1 Umberto Eco. (2002). "Rãzboaiele sfinte: patimã si ratiune". ["The Holy Wars: Passion and Reason"] in *Adevãrul literar si artistic*. [Romanian version]. 612.

2 It is also interesting that the difference entailed by the Other has often been transposed in olfactory terms. For details, see Ioan Petru Culianu, *Cãlãtorii în lumea de dincolo*, [Journeys into the Nether world] translated by Gabriela Oisteanu and Andrei Oisteanu, Bucharest. Nemira Press. 1994. p 131 and 223. See also Andrei Oisteanu, *Mythos and Logos. Studies and Essays on Cultural Anthropology*. Bucharest. Nemira Press 1997. p. 196-197.

3 Stefan Afloroaei. (1998) "Cercul întâlnirii celuilalt".[The Circle of the Encounter with the Other] in Silviu B. Moldovan (ed). (1998). *Problema iugoslavã. Studii si marginalii*, [The Yugoslav Issue. Studies and Marginalia].Timisoara. Meridian 21 Delta Press. p. 158-173.

4 Bichare Klader. (1996). "Stereotipuri occidentale cu privire la Orient" [Western Stereotypes about the East] in *Secolul XX* [The 20th Century]. p. 1-3.

5 Thierry Hentsch. (1988). *L'Orient imaginaire: la vision politique occidentale de l'Est méditerranéen*. Ed. de Minuit. Paris.

6 Bichare Klader. (1996). Western Stereotypes …p. 59

7 Umberto Eco. (2002). "The Holy Wars… p 9.

8 *Ibidem*

9 *Ibidem*, P. 10.

10 Stefan Afloroaei. (1998) The Circle of the Encounter… p. 163.

11 Umberto Eco. (2002). "The Holy Wars…p. 10.

12 *Ibidem.*