

Tolerance and Enlightenment

by Peter Gerdson

Introduction

Under the surface of her busy activities the world dominating European-Western civilization is being governed by two critical aspects. On the one hand the sources of its reasonable basis seem to move towards extinction. This entails far reaching consequences, hence when people are caught up by the meaninglessness of their actions their driving force decays, they lose their freedom and are threatened by upcoming depressions. Many people from this community of civilization fall into identity crisis; they lose their inner strength.

By seeking self-assurance the basic values of a civilization are being questioned and always get to the same point of answer: that values of the European enlightenment were the basis of the European-Western civilization, and the central virtue of this value system is tolerance.

Now the European-Western civilization is thoroughly drenched by the idea that her value system which evolved during the Age of Enlightenment applies as universal law and is valid to all cultures of humanity. This opinion hides its arrogance to a certain extent, drawn from the feeling of being a superior culture. The missionary zealotry that moves the European-Western civilization out into the world is underlined by the idea that a true human being will yet arise only through internalization of these values. By this, the West feels legitimized to proceed with the forceful implementation of its value system and uses violent means.

This situation always reflects in recurrent publishing, also in the feuilletons of European-Western newspapers. These writers think non-Western, partly ancient cultures should undergo the same process of cultural changes like it happened during the European Age of Enlightenment. But they seem to leave out the fact that the superiority of the West does not come from its culture but from a development which runs parallel to the Enlightenment and starts with the establishment of a new mathematically oriented natural science that leads from engineering science to industrialization. The European-Western civilization can hence be characterized as a culture on the ground of a value system from the Enlightenment influenced by the mathematical natural science.

Hence, a contradictory situation occurs. On the one hand meaning and identity crisis lead the West into a stage of self-assurance, which regularly ends in seeing the Western value system born out of the movement of Enlightenment, although this movement is the cause for the meaning and identity crisis.

On the other hand the West sees tolerance as the main virtue of its value system, although the violent missionary zealotry the West uses to bring out its message into the world exemplifies an extreme form of intolerance.

Tolerance should reside inside, while the violating intolerance is practiced by pointing an ethical index finger. If one hints at the Enlightenment movement as the source of the Western value system for the meaning and identity crisis in a time of self-assurance, yet at the same time other cultures are said to be running through the same process, the reason to undergo a critical research of the European Enlightenment with tolerance as a cardinal virtue even doubles.

Spiritual Awakening at the end of the Middle Ages:

Illumination of consciousness

The end of the Middle Ages are signified by a historical-conscious awakening that marks a powerful and positive atmosphere, which Ulrich von Hutten has described with the following words: »The spirits awaken, the sciences blossom, there is a desire for life.«¹ What captures the people is powerful action and the will for creativity together in unity with a desire for freedom and knowledge. This spiritual awakening occurs several generations before the beginning of the Movement of the Enlightenment.

¹ Friedell, Egon: *Kulturgeschichte der Neuzeit*, 2007 S. 270.

New forms of thinking give the human urge for freedom, knowledge and individuality a new quality. This thinking is marked by intuition, spiritual ability in seeing, acknowledgment of truth and perception of the I in the other. With this fundament a reformation of religion takes place and a new mathematically oriented natural science, out of which - as a result to the precision and universality of the results - arises a power that creates the world. The historically conscious and cultural awakening realizes itself on the ground of the new religion. Regarding this fact the breakthrough to an intuitive thinking has a causal moment in the direction of freedom and world creation. The intuition a human being gains through his ability in seeing his thinking, comes from the spiritual foundation of the world.

On the basis of new forms of thinking a scientific revolution takes place, which leads to a new mathematically oriented natural science. Their constitutive methods are seen in the analysis of natural phenomena with the help of gauges and derivation of a mathematical theory from the analysis and measuring results in form of a hypothesis which is verified by an experiment. Thereby, intuition is the thinking process which brings up the hypothesis. Of special importance is the mathematical orientation of the new natural science that had evolved from the scientific revolution. The program of this science is to quantify and mathematise the nature that man encounters. Connected to this is a drastic de-qualification and decline of meaning, as all qualities of the human senses are outsourced by the method. At the same time, an emptiness in meaning takes place; because the contents of meaning become victims of the quantifying reduction. Thereby, only the material world concerns, as the world of life, the soul, feelings, emotions, the world of a human being are outsourced by the method.²

The term tolerance, which can show up in encounter with the other, does not exist; the conditions such a term would require do not at all exist. In the perception of the I in the other and the communication with the other, while he enters in a mindful exchange with the other, the human being experiences the borders of his I by perceiving in how far he differs from the other. In the mindful exchange with the other the human being experiences lifestyles, world concepts and actions of his opposite and reflects them in his own concepts with the result that he either rejects or approves of them.

By encountering the other the human being assures his identity through the acknowledgement of the differences from the other. But the perception of the I in the other leads the human beings to acknowledgement of his opposite as an equal individuality. The encounter with the other is inseparably connected with two conditional proceedings: *Firstly*, the acknowledgement of the difference between myself and the other and *secondly*, the acknowledgment of the other person being a person like me. The otherness of the other is experienced positively and in the assurance of the own identity is processed as such.

The Beginning of the Movement of the Enlightenment: Darkening of consciousness

Shortly after the intellectual awakening at the end of the Middle Ages, the cultural historical total scenario begins to move again.

Just as atheism spreads, the credo is weakened in his culturally influencing power. By the loss of transcendence through turning away from religion, a darkening of the consciousness takes place. In the following Age in the so-called process of ›secularization‹ religion is being profaned and cut short of spirituality. This ›secularization‹ draws central terms of religion under a ›secularization‹ and with it a redefinition in order to fit it into a philosophical concept. The terms that belong are ›freedom‹, which is redefined in autonomy and individualism, as well as ›science‹, ›universalism‹ and ›progress‹. ›Tolerance‹ appears as a new term.

The advocates of this second part of the development after the end of the Medieval Age ground their world view on a certain light imagery; they speak of the Age of ›Enlightenment‹. In the Netherlands the word ›*Verlichting*‹ establishes; in England the term ›*enlightening*‹ comes up, connected with the condemnation of the Middle Ages, as an era of darkness and dark superstition that is, compared to ancient times, quite outdated.

² Vgl. Gerdson, Peter: *Wie die Naturwissenschaften zum Fundament des Materialismus und Atheismus wurden*, 2009.

To answer the question »What is enlightenment?« great advocates have dedicated themselves to the movement; also Immanuel Kant in 1784, whose philosophy marks the peak of the Enlightenment: »Enlightenment is the escape of a human being from his self-inflicted nonage. [...] Have the courage to use your own intellect! is the slogan of the Enlightenment.«³

But the movement of Enlightenment is not always seen in a positive light of their founders; as Kazimir Malewitsch denotes: »In general people say that Zar Peter got and deserved his byname ›the Great‹, because by hitting a hole to the West in the meaningless cubes, he opened a window towards light. But I accuse him, because he disturbed unity, as he allowed a destructive nature to enter through and opened the window towards a highly questionable and suspicious light.«⁴ The following chapters ›tolerance‹, ›science‹ as well as ›universalism‹ and ›progress‹ illuminate the ambivalence of the movement of Enlightenment as on the one hand it propagates tolerance as virtue and yet develops thinking forms that lead to intolerance and violence.

Tolerance

The darkening of consciousness, which takes place at the beginning of the Enlightenment, is accompanied by a weakening of the I. As the same can only be recognized by the like the I is no longer recognized in the other and therefore he is no longer seen in his uniqueness as individuality. The otherness of the other is no longer experienced positively or processed in the assurance of the own identity.

The religious diversity of reformatory movements brings about conflicts. This is the situation in which the term tolerance more or less evolves that is quite fast declared as the highest virtue. At this point a sentence of philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche fits quoting: »Tolerance is a proof of distrust against the own ideal«. Nietzsche cleverly realized that the thought of tolerance shows up when the religious and world prospective fundament no longer convinces. It is interesting to take a look at the etymology and semantics of the word tolerance. One then acknowledges that it derives from the Latin word ›tolerare‹, which means as much as ›suffer, stand‹. And the word ›tolerare‹ has its root in the word ›toles‹, which means ›burden‹. ›Tolerance‹ is more or less neutrally translated by accepting the validity of other world concepts, religions, life plans and beliefs. But its etymology and semantic hint more on the fact that tolerance in this case is an emergency program which obligates to bear relations, which in reality are felt as unbearable.

Arnold Gehlen accordingly writes: »The transformation from tolerance into nihilism of letting almost everything be valid is hardly limitable from everything, this peaceful virtue is therefore in the public area unusually ambiguous, that D. H. Lawrence⁵ could describe tolerance as a ›insidious modern illness‹.«⁶ That the term tolerance appears in a society also shows that it has become chaotic in two ways: on the one hand it has become devoid of its inner harmony and on the other hand, because of a change of perception of the individual's consciousness with the result that the otherness of the other is no longer processed positively.

With the development of the tolerance term three phrases may be differentiated. It thereby becomes clear that the development of the term tolerance is closely connected to the downfall of Christianity under the influence of the Enlightenment.

The first stage at the beginning of the Enlightenment is marked by the influence of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who lived from 1729 until 1781, a dramatist and critic one of the leading advocates of the Enlightenment in the German Literature, as well as by John Locke⁷, who lived from 1632 until 1704 and is an influential English philosopher and proponent of the Enlightenment. The idea of tolerance inflamed in the freedom of religion, but then vastly spreads onto all other areas of life. In the year 1779 Lessing published the dramatic poem ›Nathan the Wise‹, which represents a desiring plea

³ Kant, Immanuel: *Was ist Aufklärung?* 1996 S. 9.

⁴ Malewitsch, Kazimir: *Suprematismus*, 1962 S. 99.

⁵ Vgl. Lawrence, David Hume: *Die gefiederte Schlange*, 1997.

⁶ Gehlen, Arnold: *Moral und Hypermoral*, 1973 S. 40.

⁷ Vgl. Locke, John: *Ein Brief über Toleranz*, 1996.

for humanity and tolerance. During the poem he tells the ›ring parable‹ that is occupied with the question of the true religion.

In this parable three brothers inherit a ring; all three rings look alike, but only one is real. The realness can no more be proven and it finally comes out that it doesn't matter which of the rings is real. The fundament of all three religions Christianity, Judaism and Islam is, as Lessing says, love in action. You can be active in her, no matter whether the ring you are wearing resp. the religion you believe in is real or not. This image of the three rings has until today convinced the audience and readers.⁸

The second stage in the ›modern Age‹ named modification of the Enlightenment is marked by the Christian term of tolerance: During the flow of the Enlightenment there are, unimpressed by the downfall of Christianity, still trends of vividly deep Christian piety. These trends place a Christian content in the term of tolerance. The reason is among others a text of the New Testament: »you shall bear one another and forgive one another, if one accuses the other; just as Christ, the Lord has forgiven you, so shall you forgive.«⁹ Tolerance therefore means to accept other human beings as creations of God regardless of their nationality, their belief or their sex. Furthermore tolerance means to listen to and respect other viewpoints, cultures and backgrounds. Christianity expresses an absolute norm. And because of this the tolerance influenced by Christianity appreciates, respects and accepts a human being, but, and which is essential, without necessarily approving one's belief, world view or his behavior or to participate in it.

The third stage in ›postmodernism‹ is marked by an effective redefinition of the term tolerance, which is basically formed by two principles: *Firstly*, there is no difference between the person and his thinking and action as well as his belief, his world concept and lifestyle; because these justify his identity. Therefore the new tolerance towards a person means to respect his belief, world view and lifestyle but also to also accept them and be supportive towards their implementation. And all beliefs, world views and lifestyles are the same and equally true because every human is equal. These two principles are fundamentally contradictory not only against Christianity but against every religion. According to the religions a human being is created from the image of God and from here his dignity accrues and the claim for the respect of his fellow. But through his thoughts and actions man can turn away from God. Hence, it should be strictly differentiated between a person and his thoughts and actions as well as his beliefs; because thinking, action, world view and lifestyle do not judge a person's love towards God, but his turnaway from God. In a society, in which all values, beliefs, lifestyles and claims for truth are regarded equally valid can only exist one universal virtue: the tolerance after its redefinition. And when this tolerance is the cardinal virtue, the only and absolute, there can only be one vice, which is intolerance. Every human being, who believes in an absolute truth, is by definition guilty of intolerance. Hence, postmodernism acts rivalry towards all religions; and will try to eliminate all religions from society.

Science

We may remind ourselves of the prior example by the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, in which he outlines the ›Age of Enlightenment‹ in context to reason. No historical source is authoritative or trustworthy unless the reason has claimed her to be so.¹⁰ Hence, a process of a progressive scientification of all cultural relations is put into action.

One then may ask what type of science we are talking about. It is the new mathematical natural science which is being redefined and bares consequences which replaces the inductive thinking methods that rely on intuition and a conclusive rational thinking of causal and logical contexts as practiced during the Scholastic Times.

Furthermore, the »object of knowledge«, that refers to the dead material world is applied to the world of life and the human being. One forgets thereby that the method brings about disqualification, emptiness and loss in meaning to the object, the object is at last reduced onto the material. When

⁸ Vgl. Gerdson, Peter: *Die Gefährdung des Christentums durch einen umgedeuteten Toleranzbegriff*, 2001.

⁹ Brief des Paulus an die Kolosser, Kap. 3, Vers 13.

¹⁰ Vgl. Kubsch, Ron: *Die Postmoderne*, 2007.

science started to look through the methodic glasses of the natural sciences she naturally sees nothing less than pure material.

From then on starts a cultural separation: On the one hand, the mathematical natural science, which remains untouched by ideas of the Enlightenment and carries on a world creating path into the future and on the other hand, the ›science of the Enlightenment‹, which consists of a alienation of the new natural science.

Universalism

Another characteristic of the movement of Enlightenment is her universalism, which claims the validity of the ideas and values of the movement for the whole of humanity. Not adopting these ideas and values means an exclusion from humanity, to be non-human. Hence, a fundament for violence is set; as the ›Non-humans‹, that reject the ideas and values, as the proponents of the Enlightenment say, must be eliminated.

The first upraise of such violence took place during the French Revolution on the Vendée as its scene: 180 000 men, women and children are solely and only killed, because they are born. About these people Couthon 1794 says: »it is not about punishing them, but about devastating them.«¹¹ What are the sources of this violent universalism, which reveals its extreme intolerance? Evolving from atheism it is the craving for equality that goes around. A human being without religion denies the existence of God and he himself becomes the highest instance. Its consequence is that he cannot bear authorities above himself and therefore fanatically seeks to pursue and implement the equality of all human beings.

This leads, however, regarding human *being* to a ›discarding‹ by an equality that denies differences.

Secondly, the adoption of the natural-scientific thinking method gains its importance through the proponents of the Enlightenment. As they acknowledge, the mathematically formulated laws of the material world derived from a universal validity, they also speak of a valid value system that is universally valid; because they believe to see a naturally scientific fundamental law in it. This is possible, because they applied the natural-scientific methods, which were used to undertake research in the material world, illegally onto the world of the human being.

Thirdly, there is another source of the proponent's universalism notable in the darkening of consciousness. As a person is, due to the weakening of the I, no longer capable of seeing the I in the other, he can no more see and acknowledge other cultures, because he has out of blindness destroyed his own culture.

Progress

What are the sources from which the idea of progress gains strength? First of all, it is the profanation of religious ideas of world history as a big war between the powers of light and darkness, from which finally God's Kingdom will evolve. The targeting history replaces the eschatology; the inscrutable plan of God's salvation becomes a rational scrutable plan of history. The progress lets a future lying on this side hope for salvation, which was until then only found in the afterworld.

The ideology of progress combines many key ideas: *Firstly*, the idea, that the new is simply worthy, because it is new, which means that history is automatically developing to the better and the future of the past is always superior. *Secondly*, the idea exists that the world is basically incomplete, but at the same time can be completed and must be changed regularly to be improved. *Thirdly*, the idea that the whole of humanity covers the same distance, which leads her from one chapter to the next tracing a better future, from this follows that history in a whole is constantly continuous and the conditionality of cultures only a temporary coincidence. *Fourthly*, the idea that some societies on their march forward are ›more progressed‹ than others, which allows or even obligates them to entail the means on the ›latecomers‹ that will enable them to catch up with the backwardness. *Fifthly*, the idea that the accumulation of the material wealth is one of the best methods to measure ›the process of the

¹¹ Benoist, Alain de: *Totalitarismus, Kommunismus und Nationalsozialismus*, 2001 S. 137.

progress« whereas the nature of a human being himself develops to the extent that his life conditions improve.¹²

A human being becomes a full human, as proponents of the Enlightenment say, when he has overcome ›nature« and advances to ›civilization«. Humanity must therefore break with everything that hinders its advance: with ›prejudices«, ›superstitions«, with the ›burden of the past«. Indirectly, with this, the terror of the French Revolution has been justified: If progress is a historical necessity everyone who defies it may justifiably be eliminated; who opposes progress forfeits his humanness and may be defined as an enemy of the category. The terms › progress « and ›civilization« are used almost synonymously. The idea of progress serves as apology of colonialism, which should spread the ›achievements« of civilization in the whole world.¹³

Concluding thoughts

What should one think about a movement whose spiritual substance derives from atheism, profanation of religious contents and that consists of a science whose essential elements arise from the redefinition and alienation of a mathematical natural science? What should one think about a movement that cultivates the concept of tolerance on the one hand and tries to underline its epistemic foundation, whose main concepts are on the other hand a theoretical and practical tendency towards a violent intolerance?

What should one think about a movement whose conceptual methods derive from the destruction of cultures? How could such a movement become an influencing power in and for the future?

It became possible due to the bend and alienation of a powerful cultural-historical impulse of awakening as well as to the disguise of a light metaphoric.

¹² Vgl. Benoist, Alain de: *Schöne vernetzte Welt*, 2001 S. 342.

¹³ Vgl. Ebenda.