'ON TOLERANCE'

Frank Furedi argues that the meaning of tolerance has
changed in the modern world, and not for the better

Tolerance is an important ideal that is indispensable for the working of a genuinely free and democratic society. Yet it is an ideal we take for granted and do not take very seriously. Numerous articles and books on this subject treat it as a boring and rather insignificant idea that doesn't go far enough to secure a just society. Others depict tolerance as a disinclination to judge or to have strong views about the behaviour of others. Increasingly, we are in danger of forgetting what tolerance as an intimate companion of liberty and freedom actually means. The aim of this lecture is to remind ourselves that tolerance constitutes one of the most precious contributions of the Enlightenment movement to modern life. Without tolerance we cannot be free, we cannot live with one another in relative peace, we cannot follow and act on our conscience, we cannot exercise our moral autonomy, and we cannot pursue our own road towards seeking the truth.

It is important to recall that tolerance is a very recent ideal in historical terms. Until the seventeenth century, the toleration of different religions, opinions and beliefs was interpreted as a form of moral cowardice if not a symptom of heresy. Indeed, medieval witch-hunters and inquisitors were no less concerned with stigmatising those who questioned their intolerant practices than they were with hunting down witches and heretics. The fifteenth-century witch-hunters' manual, *Malleus Maleficarum*, claimed those who denied the existence of witches were as guilty of heresy as the active practitioners of witchcraft. In the sixteenth century, scepticism was frequently treated as a particularly dangerous form of anti-Christian heresy. As the French historian Paul Hazard noted in his pioneering study, *The European Mind*, until the seventeenth century, tolerance

'had not been a virtue at all, but, on the contrary, a sign of weakness, not to say cowardice.' He added that 'duty and charity' forbade people to be tolerant.[1]

It was in the seventeenth century that attitudes towards tolerating competing ideas and religions began to change. In part, the rise of secularism and rationality encouraged a more sceptical orientation towards religious dogmatism and intolerance. This was also a period when Europe was overwhelmed by bitter religious conflicts that frequently resulted in bloody civil wars. In such circumstances, calls for tolerance were influenced by the pragmatic calculation that without a measure of religious toleration, endemic violence and bloodshed could not be avoided. This was the moment when a significant minority of Europeans recognised that tolerance was a pre-requisite for their society's survival. The American philosopher Michael Walzer emphasised the significance of this insight when he said toleration 'sustains life itself.' Time and again, we have needed to remind ourselves that 'toleration makes difference possible; difference makes toleration necessary.'[2]

The aim of seventeenth-century advocates of tolerance such as John Locke was to protect religious belief from state coercion. Locke's advocacy of tolerance represented a call for restraining political authorities from interfering with the workings of individual conscience. Over the centuries, this affirmation of religious

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tolerance was expanded to allow the free expression of opinions, beliefs and behaviour associated with the exercise of the individual conscience. Tolerance is intimately connected to the affirmation of the most basic dimension of freedom—the freedom of belief and conscience. The ideal of tolerance demands that we accept the right of people to live according to beliefs and opinions that are different, sometimes antithetical to ours. Tolerance does not invite us to accept or celebrate other people's sentiments. It demands that we live with them and desist from interfering or forcing others to fall in line with our own views.

Tolerance pertains to the domain of the political/philosophical through its avowal of the principle of non-interference towards the way people develop and hold beliefs and opinions. Tolerance affirms the freedom of conscience and individual autonomy. As long as an act does not violate a person's moral autonomy and harm others, tolerance also calls for the absence of constraint on behaviour linked to the exercise of individual autonomy. From this perspective, tolerance can be measured in relation to the extent to which people's belief and behaviour is not subject to institutional and political interference and restraint. Second, tolerance is also a social/cultural accomplishment. A tolerant society is one where tolerance as a cultural orientation discourages and restrains social intolerance. This was a concern eloquently pursued by the philosopher John Stuart Mill, who warned about the 'tyranny of public opinion' and its tendency to stigmatise and silence minority and dissident beliefs. Upholding the disposition to be tolerant is always a challenge, and as experience shows, legal safeguards can always come unstuck when confronted by a tidal wave of intolerance.

What tolerance is not

Anyone perusing policy documents, mission statements, school textbooks, and speeches made by politicians and policymakers is likely to be struck by the frequency with which the term tolerance is used and praised. Outwardly at least everyone appears to celebrate tolerance, and it is difficult to encounter any significant acclaim for intolerance. However, on closer inspection, it becomes evident that the meaning of this term has radically altered. It has mutated into a superficial signifier of acceptance and affirmation of anyone and everyone. In official documents and school texts, tolerance is used as a desirable character trait rather than as a way of managing conflicting beliefs and behaviour. So one can be tolerant without any reference to a set of beliefs or opinions. Moreover, tolerance as an act of not interfering or attempting to suppress beliefs that contradict one's own sentiments has given way to the idea that it also involves not judging other people and their views. So instead of serving as a way of responding to differences of views, tolerance has become a way of not taking them seriously. Arguably, when tolerance is represented as a form of detached indifference or a polite gesture connoting automatic acceptance, it becomes a vice rather than a virtue.

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One reason why tolerance was interpreted as a virtue historically was because it implied a willingness to tolerate disagreeable beliefs and opinions instead of attempting to suppress them. According to the classical liberal outlook, tolerance involved an act of judgment and discrimination. But judgment does not serve as a prelude to censoring another person's wrong belief because tolerance demands respect for the right of people to hold beliefs in accordance with their conscience. Indeed, the recognition of the primacy of the virtue of freedom imposed on the truly tolerant implies the responsibility to refrain from attempting to coerce religious and political opponents into silence. Voltaire's frequently repeated statement, 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it,' expressed the intimate connection between judgment and a commitment to freedom. In contemporary public discussion, the connection between tolerance and judgment is in danger of being lost due to the current

cultural obsession with being non-judgmental. An analysis of the current usage of tolerance indicates that it is frequently used as a companion term with 'inclusive' and 'non-judgmental.'[3] As a fascinating survey of American political culture concluded, 'Thou shalt not judge' has become the eleventh commandment of middle-class Americans. Alan Wolfe, the study's author, noted: 'Middle-class Americans are reluctant to pass judgment on how other people act and think.'[4] While the reluctance to judge other people's behaviour has its attractive qualities, it is not necessarily a manifestation of social tolerance.

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The confusion of the concept of tolerance with the idea of acceptance and valuation of other people's beliefs and lifestyles is strikingly illustrated in UNESCO's Declaration on the Principles of Tolerance: 'Tolerance is respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human' and it is 'harmony in difference.'[5] From this perspective, tolerance becomes an expansive and diffuse sensibility that unquestioningly appreciates other cultures. It is a sensibility that doesn't judge but automatically accepts and offers unconditional appreciation of different views and cultures. This official declaratory rhetoric of tolerance is often used in schools, and children interpret it as an exhortation to be nice to other people.

The reinterpretation of tolerance as a psychological attitude that conveys acceptance, empathy and respect means that it has lost its real meaning in public deliberations. Yet it is precisely the intimate connection between disapproval/disagreement and toleration that endows tolerance with enormous significance. The act of tolerance demands reflection, restraint and a respect for the right of other people to find their way to their own truth. Once tolerance

signifies a form of automatic acceptance, it becomes a performance in expected behaviour. The most troubling consequence of the rhetorical transformation of this term has been its disassociation from discrimination and judgment. When tolerance acquires the status of a default response connoting approval, people are protected from troubling themselves with the challenge of engaging with moral dilemmas.

The call to reinterpret tolerance as a sentiment to convey non-judgmentalism or indifference is often presented as a positive character trait of the open-minded person. But the gesture of affirmation and acceptance can be seen as a way of avoiding making difficult moral choices and of disengaging from the complicated challenge of explaining the values that have to be upheld. It is far easier to dispense with the idea of moral judgment than with explaining why a certain way of life is preferable to the one that can be tolerated but not embraced.

Tolerance has also been adapted by well-meaning national and international agencies and institutions as an adjective that conveys a sense of harmony and peacefulness. Not infrequently, it is depicted as the polar opposite of conflict. The UNESCO Declaration on Tolerance is paradigmatic in this respect. Its call for tolerance is presented as a response to its alarm:

> … by the current rise in acts of intolerance, violence, terrorism, xenophobia, aggressive nationalism, racism, anti-Semitism, exclusion, marginalization and discrimination directed against national, ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, refugees, migrant workers, immigrants and vulnerable groups within societies, as well as acts of violence and intimidation committed against individuals exercising their freedom of opinion and expression—all of which threaten the consolidation of peace and democracy, both nationally and internationally, and are obstacles to development.[6]

The representation of tolerance as an antidote to a variety of group conflicts represents an

understandable but unhelpful expansion of the meaning of tolerance.

The reorientation of tolerance from personal beliefs to group identities does not simply mean its quantitative expansion but a qualitative transformation in meaning. Tolerance has a different meaning when addressed towards religious beliefs and political opinions that express 'individual moral understanding' to when it is directed towards 'attributes or identities taken to be given, saturating, and immutable.'[7] The tendency to perceive differences in group and cultural terms distracts attention from conflicts of belief and opinion. However, it is important to understand that tolerance pertains to beliefs and behaviour and not to differences in cultural or national identities. Everyone who upholds liberty will adopt a liberal and open-minded approach towards the right of all people to be who they are. But the recognition of this right has little to do with the classical ideal of tolerance. Tolerance is in the first instance directed towards opinion and belief and not towards groups and people. In such circumstances, what's called for is the affirmation of the democratic right to equal treatment.

The term tolerance can be used to signify an approach towards a person and a group insofar as it pertains to beliefs and opinions and forms of behaviour linked to them. So tolerating Protestants, Muslims or Jews pertains not to their DNA or their cultural or national identity but to their beliefs and the rituals and practices associated with them. Unfortunately in contemporary society, differences in views are invariably represented as cultural rather than as linked to individual conscience or moral reasoning. According to this perspective, belief is not so much the outcome of reflection, conscience, revelation or discovery but an attribute of identity. One important consequence of this shift in emphasis is that belief and opinion are seen as less an attribute of individuals and more as an immutable character of the culture they personify. No longer a product of reflection and thought, beliefs acquire the fetish-like form of a cultural value that is fixed and not susceptible to a genuine conversation. In such circumstances, tolerance can only mean an acceptance of the fossilisation of difference.

Historically, laws concerning religious tolerance emerged before other forms of democratic freedoms were recognised. It is essential to understand that tolerance is not only chronologically but also logically prior to the ideas of freedom and liberty. If people are not allowed to hold their own beliefs and act in accordance with them, their very potential for exercising their moral autonomy becomes compromised.

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Outwardly, we live in an era that appears more open minded, non-judgmental and tolerant that at any time in human history. The very term 'intolerant' invokes moral condemnation. Time and again, the public is instructed on the importance of respecting different cultures and diversity. Students are frequently reminded that there is no such thing as the right answer and that there are many truths. Those with strong beliefs are often dismissed as fundamentalists or zealots. Yet the language of open-minded liberalism exists in an uneasy relation with censorious and intolerant attitudes towards those causing moral outrage. That policymakers and politicians can so casually demand 'zero tolerance' indicates that at the very least, society is selective about how it applies the principle of tolerance.

Zero tolerance can be understood as a cultural metaphor that prescribes an indiscriminate template response to different forms of undesirable behaviour. Initially, zero tolerance was invoked as the threat of an automatic punishment of certain forms of criminal behaviour and legal infraction. Since the 1990s, the policy of zero tolerance has been expanded into the school system to refer to acts of bullying, harassment, possessing drugs or weapons. In the UK public sector, it is common to come across signs that warn zero tolerance towards aggressive behaviour towards members of staff. In recent times, the term zero tolerance

has been adopted by politicians, opinion makers, and business people to communicate the idea that they feel strongly that the target of their concern should be suppressed. The casual way with which zero-tolerance policies—which serve as warrants for intolerance—are affirmed expresses the shallow cultural support enjoyed by the ideal of tolerance.

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Although the term zero tolerance conveys the idea that its author means business, it also calls into questions the cultural and human qualities usually associated with the capacity to tolerate. As social commentator Bruce Schneier reminds us, 'these so-called zero-tolerance policies are actually zero-discretion policies.'[8] These are the policies that are meant to be applied arbitrarily and punish without regard to circumstances. It spares judges and officials from having to think about the circumstances affecting a particular event and from exercising their capacity to discriminate and judge. The abolishing of the employment of discretion reflects a general unease with the act of judgment and discrimination. Yet these qualities are essential for developing the disposition to tolerate and also to develop an understanding of what form of behaviour cannot be tolerated. The widespread usage of this metaphor indicates that non-judgmentalism is a value upheld not only by the advocates of tolerance but also by promoters of zero tolerance. Their joint hostility towards discretion indicates they may have more in common than they suspect.

Tolerance under attack

Tolerance has always been very selectively elaborated, conceptualised and applied. From the outset, its advocates believed in the tolerance of some views but not others. Throughout the seventeenth century, religious leaders, philosophers and political leaders tended to promote tolerance opportunistically and tactically. This tendency continues to this day. During the course of a debate in Amsterdam, I encountered people who agreed that there should be tolerance towards people prepared to criticise Islam but that there should be zero tolerance towards deniers of the Holocaust. I also have had the pleasure of meeting people who argue the reverse and insist that while it is tolerable to question the existence of gas chambers in Auschwitz, any blasphemy directed towards the Koran should be banned.

The double standard that afflicts discussions around the Holocaust or Islam is regrettably all too evident in relation to a variety of subjects, even in serious academic literature. Somehow, abstract philosophical explorations of the tensions contained within tolerance conclude by taking sides. Indeed, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that such philosophical enquiries are far from disinterested studies of the application of the idea of tolerance to contemporary debates about identity politics, lifestyle controversies, or the right of free speech to offend. All too often, they represent a plea for tolerating or respecting groups and views that they uphold and for adopting an intolerant stance towards those they condemn. So the Italian political philosopher Anna Galeotti insists that minorities are not just to be tolerated but also respected, whereas those use 'hate speech' against them can be censored and silenced. 'It is argued that the restriction of some people's liberty is necessary to allow for the full toleration of differences which are the target of discrimination and prejudice,' she contends.[9]

The regularity with which double standards are applied towards tolerance indicates that such inconsistency is not simply a symptom of moral opportunism but also the absence of a robust system of cultural support for genuine tolerance. Indeed, it is striking how the official exhortation to be tolerant appears to lack significant intellectual and moral support. Although there are some important honourable exceptions, academics and social commentators do not appear to take tolerance very seriously. Often, tolerance is casually dismissed, treated as an ideal past its use-by date, or represented as a necessary but passive act of putting up with someone else's view. The act of tolerance also attracts

fundamentally negative connotations because it involves putting up with views deemed wrong or inferior. 'Because of tolerance's negative connotations, it is frequently rejected as a political principle in favour of loftier ideas of equality, liberty, or respect,' writes one thoughtful commentator on this subject.[10]

In recent decades, the negative representation of tolerance has gained significant momentum. 'In many circles, toleration has a negative image,' writes an Australian political scientist. 'It is associated with either mere toleration (as opposed to some sort of enthusiastic acceptance or respect), and also with the necessary association of a negative value.'[11] The idea that 'mere tolerance' is not enough or is even disrespectful is fuelled by a cultural sensibility that is deeply uncomfortable with the act of making value judgments and of questioning and criticising other people's version of the truth. Indeed, one way of freeing tolerance from having a negative image is by disassociating tolerance from judgment.

The claim that tolerance is not enough is often associated with the argument that it is not really suitable for managing conflicts between different individuals and groups in contemporary society. Professor of Islamic Studies Tariq Ramadan is prepared to accept that tolerance had some value in the distant past but contends that it no longer possesses any positive virtues.

> What was once an act of resistance in the face of powers (which can also be represented by the majority, the elite, the rich, and so on), and a brave, determined call inviting them to be tolerant, changes its meaning and import when we are dealing with equal relationships between free human beings, relations between the citizens of civil society, or even relations between different cultures and civilizations.[12]

According to this argument, tolerance has lost its positive content because it no longer involves the questioning of power. Consequently, Ramadan portrays the call for tolerance as expressing acquiescence to prevailing power relations.

Calling upon powers to be tolerant once meant asking them to moderate their strength and to limit their ability to do harm: this actually implied an acceptance of a power relationship that might exist between the State and individuals, the police and citizens, or between colonizers and the colonized.[13]

It is important to recall that the call for tolerance by early liberals like Locke, and later by Mill, was not motivated by the objective of challenging relations of power but by the goal of restraining the state from regulating people's views and opinions. This outlook was motivated by the impulse of upholding the freedom of belief, conscience and speech because liberals took the view that it was preferable for people to find their own path to the truth than that truth should be imposed from above.[14] It was how the power of the state was used rather than the relation of power that the demand for toleration sought to address. However, Ramadan's principal motive for questioning the virtue of tolerance is not his commitment to question the prevailing relations of power but his objection to the acts of judgment, evaluation and discrimination that are integral to the act of tolerance.

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Ramadan regards tolerance as a form of paternalism towards the objects of their tolerance. He castigates tolerance as the 'intellectual charity' of the powerful. Indeed, from this perspective, this act constitutes an insult since 'when standing on equal footing, one does not expect to be merely tolerated or grudgingly accepted.'[15] In an era where acceptance and affirmation have acquired the status of a default gesture towards other people, tolerance can readily be interpreted as patronising or simply not enough. It is frequently argued that people 'do not want to

be subject to the negative valuation that tolerance necessarily seems to carry with it.' According to the philosopher John Horton, people want more than tolerance: 'The demand for more than mere tolerance is the demand that what one is or does no longer be the object of the negative valuation that is an essential ingredient of toleration.'[16]

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The statement that people do not want to be tolerated is another way of saying that not only do they not want to be judged but they also want to be affirmed. Western culture's dissonance with tolerance is further reinforced by its celebration of the therapeutic value of affirmation and self-esteem. Today, the affirmation of individual and group identity is frequently presented as a sacred duty. It is precisely the contradiction between tolerance and affirmation that fosters an inhospitable cultural climate for the practice of tolerance. One strategy for overcoming this contradiction is to expand the meaning of tolerance to encompass the ideas of acceptance and respect. Galeotti argues along this line for a 'general revision of the concept of toleration.' What she proposes is the transformation of the meaning of tolerance so that it communicates the act of recognition, saying 'toleration will be conceived as a form of recognition of different identities in the public sphere' through a 'semantic extension from the negative meaning of non-interference to the positive sense of acceptance and recognition.'[17] This semantic extension of the concept to encompass the idea of uncritical recognition transforms its very meaning. Positive tolerance is a contradiction in terms. In effect, it is another term for unconditional acceptance.

Ramadan also upholds the value of recognition and respect but because he is far more consistent than Galeotti, he rejects the concept of tolerance altogether. Instead of giving tolerance a new meaning, he seeks to consign it to the vocabulary of cultural domination. He insists that 'when it comes to relations between free and equal human beings, autonomous and independent nations, or civilizations, religions and cultures, appeals for the tolerance of others are no longer relevant.' Why? Because 'when we are on equal terms, it is no longer a matter of *conceding* tolerance, but of rising above that and educating ourselves to respect others.'[18] It is worth noting that the liberal idea of tolerance also upholds the notion of respect. Not the unconditional affirmation transmitted by today's anti-judgmental respect but the liberal notion of respecting people's potential for exercising moral autonomy.

It is important to understand that calls for respect and recognition do not simply mean an exhortation to be polite and sensitive to the beliefs, cultures and predicament of other people. It often expresses disenchantment with people's capacity to exercise moral agency. The provision of unconditional recognition is based on the belief that individuals and groups are disposed towards psychological harm unless they are routinely affirmed. The conviction that people require affirmation is based on the premise that they lack the intellectual and moral resources to cope with conflicting opinions. In particular, critics of tolerance are frequently hostile or sceptical about the very exercise of individual autonomy.

Opponents of the liberal idea of tolerance insist they aspire to something more elevated or progressive than the gesture of mere toleration. Often, they insist that the classical concept of tolerance is too negative and what they propose is a more positive version of this ideal. Former Taoiseach of Ireland Garrett Fitzgerald recalled that for him the word toleration 'still carries echoes of at best grudging acceptance, and at worst ill-disguised hostility,' which is why he wants a more positive term that affirms 'human solidarity.'[19] The German philosopher Karl-Otto Apel argues that negative tolerance is not sufficient to deal with the challenges faced by a multicultural society. He calls for the embrace of 'positive or affirmative tolerance' that respects and 'even' supports a 'variety of value traditions.'[20] However, the claim that the classical ideal

of tolerance is merely negative is based on a misunderstanding of the dialect of tolerance and disapproval. An example of this confusion is provided by Galeotti when she writes, 'if they could, tolerant people would wish the tolerated behaviour out of existence.'[21] The argument that given half a chance, the tolerant would rather get rid of the views that they disapprove misunderstands the meaning of tolerance. The act of tolerance is not a grudgingly extended altruistic gesture. Nor does it simply mean deciding to live with behaviour and sentiment that one disapproves. It represents a positive appreciation of the necessity for diverse views and conflicting beliefs. As Mill noted, individual autonomy can only flourish when exposed to a variety of opinions, beliefs and lifestyles. Tolerance represents a positive orientation towards creating the conditions where people can develop their autonomy through the freedom to choose.

Critics of so-called negative tolerance not only overlook its liberating potential but by failing to take this ideal seriously, they often become accomplices to projects of intolerance. Once tolerance is regarded as an instrumental act of indifference to views and opinions, the upholding of the freedom of belief and speech ceases to have any intrinsic virtue. That is why Herbert Marcuse, in his critique 'repressive tolerance,' could effortlessly make a leap from his denunciation of capitalist cultural domination to calling for the suppression of views he found objectionable. He had no problems about the 'withdrawal of toleration of speech and assembly from groups and movements' that promote 'aggressive policies' or 'discrimination on the grounds of race and religion, or which oppose the extension of public services, social security, medical care.'[22] Numerous contemporary critics of 'negative' tolerance follow Marcuse's path and argue for a selective approach towards tolerance to find themselves elaborating some very inventive arguments for policing speech and censoring views they find abhorrent. In such circumstances, developing a consistent and genuinely liberal approach towards tolerance is an urgent task confronting those who are concerned about the future of democracy.

Endnotes

1   Paul Hazard, *The European Mind: 1680–1715* (1935) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 344.
2   Michael Walzer, *On Toleration* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1997), xii.
3   See Frank Furedi, *On Tolerance: A Defence of Moral Independence* (Continuum Press, 2010).
4   Alan Wolfe, *One Nation, After All: What Middle-Class Americans Really Think About* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1998), 54.
5   UNESCO, 'Declaration on the Principles of Tolerance' (1995).
6   As above.
7   Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press: 2006), 35.
8   Bruce Schneier, 'Zero-Tolerance Policies' (3 November 2009).
9   Anna Galeotti, *Toleration as Recognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 14.
10 Leslie C. Griffin, 'Fighting the New Wars of Religion: The Need for a Tolerant First Amendment,' *Maine Law Review* 62: 1 (2010), 27.
11 Peter Balint, 'The Practice of Toleration and the Attitude of Tolerance,' paper presented to the Australasian Political Studies Association Conference (University of Newcastle, 2006), 4.
12 Tariq Ramadan, *The Quest For Meaning: Developing a Philosophy of Pluralism* (London: Allen Lane, 2010), 47.
13 As above.
14 See Susan Mendus (ed.), *The Politics of Toleration* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 77.
15 Tariq Ramadan, as above, 47.
16 John Horton, 'Toleration as a Virtue,' in David Heyd (ed.), *Toleration: An Elusive Virtue* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 35.
17 Anna Galeotti, as above, 10.
18 Tariq Ramadan, as above, 48.
19 Garrett Fitzgerald, 'Toleration or Solidarity?' in Susan Mendus (ed.), *The Politics of Toleration*, as above, 13.
20 Karl-Otto Apel, 'Plurality of the good? The problem of affirmative tolerance in a multicultural society from an ethical point of view,' *Ratio Juris* 10:2 (1997), 200–201.
21 Anna Galeotti, as above, 159.
22 Herbert Marcuse, 'Repressive tolerance,' in Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, Jr., and Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 7.