The Peace of Westphalia – the Birth of Tolerance

By Carol Schwyzer, © MoneyMuseum
(Translated by Graham Pascoe)

Tolerance as a vitally necessary political, religious and social attitude arose in the 17th century out of the chaos of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) which raged over most of Germany and much of central and eastern Europe. It was ended by the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which for the first time gave tolerance a legal basis. Tolerance is much in demand today too, in bringing peace to the world's centres of conflict such as the Middle East. So a glance back into the past can be helpful – we can draw useful lessons from it for the present.

Are you tolerant?

"Of course!" you will say – after all, in today's world tolerance is seen as a personal virtue, as a desirable quality. Someone with a reputation for intolerance is seen as narrow-minded, inflexible, unreasonable, even reactionary and racist. But be honest: how tolerant are you really, when foreign, different things come directly into your daily life? What if a conservative Muslim were to move in next door to you and fill his garden with veiled women on summer evenings? And how does a Moroccan feel if his town is overrun with women tourists who assault his feelings of decency with their skimpy clothes?

The moment we see, feel or smell that someone lives quite differently from ourselves, we feel challenged, irritated, disconcerted. And the nearer that foreignness comes to us, the more we feel that way. It begins in the private sphere. You don't object to techno music as such. But if it comes out of the room of your 16-year-old offspring, for hour after hour, don't you feel aggression rising within you? And when your sweet little daughter announces her intention of attending the 80th birthday of her invariably elegant grandmother in torn jeans and sloppy T-shirt, don't the sparks begin to fly from you as well?

Different styles of living and thinking in the same house, in the same family, in the same town, the same country, the same world – all that causes friction. It's partly because the foreign way of life, the foreign style, constantly confronts us with the question "Is my way of life the only right one?" It's important to realise the level of one's own tolerance. It's the only way to measure the truly great and manifold meaning of tolerance.

The meaning of the word "tolerance"

"Tolerance" comes from Latin tolerare, to bear, to endure. And what exactly is it that has to be endured? Simply the fact that someone else dresses, eats, thinks and prays differently from the way we feel to be right, from the way we were brought up to approve of. Tolerance can be defined as a readiness to accept differences. So it's not surprising that tolerance is only needed where there are differences. Tolerance is a simple question of how much difference a person is prepared to accept.

The word "tolerance" came into English in the 14th century from Latin through French, and was followed in the 16th century by the verb "to tolerate" and the noun "toleration" (meaning the act of tolerating), both taken directly from Latin. Both came in the 17th century to refer to religious toleration, which was a major issue before and during the Elizabethan era, and even more so during the English Civil War of 1642-1649. Tolerance and intolerance became a subject for philosophers,

of whom the most famous are the Englishman John Locke and the Frenchman Voltaire. With his goal of the continuous realisation of reason, Voltaire found many associates – reason and tolerance were major themes during the Enlightenment. The king of Prussia, Frederick II (the Great), was deeply influenced by Voltaire, who lived at the Prussian court from 1750 to 1753. Frederick's motto was that of the supremely enlightened monarch: "In my state everyone can seek happiness in his own way."

Learning from yesterday for today

The vital importance of tolerance in the world of today can be seen by taking a look at the current ethnic and religious conflicts in the world, such as that in the Middle East, which shows us just how bloody, time-consuming, and deeply worrying, the search for peace can be. It may seem obvious to outsiders that both sides to the dispute will have to follow the path of tolerance if they are to attain peace, but it is unclear when and at what price the two sides will be prepared to go along that path. Today's conflicts are so laden with emotions that it is difficult to view them clearly. It is often easier to debate today's issues by looking at a historical example.

A look at the Thirty Years War and the Peace of Westphalia that ended it can help us to understand the vital importance of religious, political and social tolerance not only in those times but today too. The legal fixing of tolerance in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 arose from the necessity of ending a long bloody war that had brought great human suffering, in order to lay the foundation of a new community. Seeing how peace was established in those days gives us hope for our own day.

The Thirty Years War – a short overview

The Thirty Years War (1618-1648) arose broadly from two causes:

1. The religious settlement signed at Augsburg in 1555 was no longer respected once the Counter-Reformation had got under way. That led to conflict between the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestants.

2. Various participants were mainly concerned with increasing their power or their independence. The various princes in Germany wanted to free themselves from the power of the Emperor. The Austrian imperial family, the Habsburgs, fought together with Spain against Sweden and France. The war was started by the so-called "Defenestration of Prague" of 1618.

Course of the war: Initially things went badly for the Protestants. The Catholic League led by Duke Maximilian of Bavaria, with its armies commanded by General Tilly, won a whole series of victories. In 1625 King Christian IV of Denmark invaded northern Germany to help the Protestants. He was beaten by Wallenstein, another Catholic general. But King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden joined the fray as a protector of the Protestants, but also aiming to preserve his power in the Baltic region. After the Swedish victory at the Battle of Lützen in 1632, the war, which had begun in the name of religion, became more and more a mere struggle for power. France, which was basically a Catholic country, allied itself with Sweden against the Habsburgs and Spain, its principal enemies, in order to take over the leadership of Europe. For the first time in European history, reasons of state rather than religion decided a country's alliances. The war was fought mainly on German soil, by powers from outside Germany, with disastrous results for the German population.

The war ended on 24 October 1648, after five years of tough negotiations, with the signing of the Westphalian peace treaties in Münster and Osnabrück.

Tolerance: one of the victors of the Peace of Westphalia

The political victors by the Peace of Westphalia were the powers that had extended their territory. Sweden, for example, received Lower Pomerania and the control of the Baltic; France gained Alsace and significant territory west of the Rhine. Other victors were those who had won their independence. The Netherlands and Switzerland were from then onwards legally independent republics, and within Germany the nobility and citizenry had won their independence as powers within the German empire beside the Emperor. The result was that Germany disintegrated into some 300 independent states; the main losers were the Habsburgs and the central power in Germany, and Spain was also finished as a great power.

In the religious field, three confessions were recognised, with equal rights: Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinistic. The year 1624 was taken as the "base year" for the state of religion and church property: North Germany remained Protestant, Bohemia, Moravia, Austria and the Palatinate became Catholic once more. The rulers of German states were to permit their subjects freedom of conscience and the private practice of their religion. In addition, their subjects had the right of ius emigrandi, the right to emigrate to an area of their religion. The basic cause of the war, the differences between the Catholics and the Protestants, was now legitimised. After the Peace of Westphalia the basic principle was that the state permitted its citizens the free exercise of their religion provided they obeyed the law and paid their taxes. Seen from that point of view, the Peace of Westphalia can be called the birth of tolerance. Tolerance was clearly one of the victors of the Thirty Years War, and its establishment was one of the most important historical achievements of the early modern age.

"Pluralism as a threat: tolerance as the solution"

The importance of the birth of tolerance in the peace treaties of Münster and Osnabrück was emphasised in the ceremonies marking the 350th anniversary of the Peace of Westphalia. In his commemorative speech with the title "Pluralism as a threat: tolerance as the solution," the historian Winfried Schulze traces the historical contexts that led to the emergence of tolerance.

It is hardly surprising that the birth of tolerance took place in an age in which the unified world-view of the Middle Ages was breaking apart. The basic motto of Emperor Charles V, whose empire was the first on which the sun never set, was "One empire, one faith." The unity of the Christian West, with the Pope and the Emperor at its head, was seen as divinely ordained. The Roman Catholic Church also dominated intellectual and cultural life – knowledge was preserved and passed on by monasteries. But with the advent of the Reformation, led by Martin Luther, that unity was broken down. Suddenly there was more than one single faith, and the previously unquestioned authority of Rome was doubted.

And scientists such as Bruno, Galilei and Copernicus made empirical observations that contradicted the dogmas of the Catholic Church. Navigators such as Columbus and Magellan encountered continents with different peoples, animals and plants. Printing with movable type, invented in Europe by Gutenberg in 1452, quickly spread the new knowledge. In 1567 there appeared in Strasbourg a German translation of a work in Latin by a Swedish bishop, which for the first time revealed to central Europeans the customs and the animal world of northern Europe. The world was varied, the translator stated in his preface. And this varied world was created by God and had to be accepted in its confusing variety. And at the beginning of the early modern period the fundamental view began to change: the focus, which in the Middle Ages had been one-dimensional, directed towards God and the other world, was now directed at this world. Man moved into the centre, the dominant world-view became pluralistic.

Anxiety as a driving force

But what changes are caused within individual people by the change in world-view towards pluralisation, today just as much as in the past? The American historian William J. Bouwsma addresses this question in his book Anxiety and the Formation of Early Culture. He investigates the period between the beginning of the 14th and the middle of the 17th centuries from the point of view of anxiety.

The anxiety of a society that has lost its inner order is reflected on the one hand in visions of the approaching apocalypse. On the other hand, in their efforts to conquer that anxiety, people were driven to great cultural achievements. They now want to attain knowledge and understanding of the reality of the world, which shows itself to be so varied.

Tolerance begins with religion...

The terrible years of devastation and suffering caused by the Thirty Years War arose out of a fundamental conflict of religious beliefs. For a long time both parties aimed at total victory and fought with increasing brutality. Not until the population of Germany had been reduced by 40 per cent by the horrors of war, until the German economy was ruined, culture extinguished and morals utterly brutalised, was there any readiness to compromise. In the end both sides realised that there was no other way to put an end to the terror except to accept each other's rights. "The question of religious truth gave way to the question of survival and the order of society," says Winfried Schulze. It was the granting of religious toleration in the Westphalian peace treaties that brought a first step in the solution of the conflict between old and new. So tolerance as an overall concept began with religious toleration. In the years that followed, the ideas of the Enlightenment extended toleration to the political and social fields.

...and becomes a right

Naturally there had been toleration ordinances before, such as the Milan Edict of Toleration of 313 and the Edict of Nantes proclaimed by King Henri IV of France in 1598. The Peace of Augsburg of 1555 also contained an article guaranteeing the Protestants religious toleration. But those forward-looking edicts were continually reversed – for example, the Edict of Nantes was revoked by Louis XIV in 1685. But in the Westphalian peace treaties something new appears: for the first time the question of religious denomination is regulated in a treaty, on the basis of constitutional law. From then on, religion in Germany was subject to the law. That was a stark contrast to the view in the Middle Ages, when religion had dominated all aspects of life. Now, however, the state was committed to toleration, and accepted the religious freedom of individuals, who were thus able to live a life free of state interference.

The achievement of tolerance in the Peace of Westphalia had permanent results: since 1648 there have been no more religious wars in Germany.

The history of tolerance – a success story?

One would like to hope and believe as much. But just read the newspapers, listen to the news, watch television! That's enough to show that they still exist, those religious and political differences, discrimination against minorities, aggression against those who are different – not to forget actual wars.

Since 1948 tolerance has been enshrined as a fundamental human right in the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights. In reality it is far from being achieved. Declarations of tolerance are still reversed, and the principles of equality are still infringed. Intolerance constantly arises afresh, but its targets have changed. In the past in Europe a marriage between a Catholic and a Protestant was a scandal, a misalliance doomed to disaster. No one seriously believes that now, but if a Palestinian man wants to marry an Israeli woman, or a Christian woman wants to marry a Muslim man, the question of tolerance becomes acute. Tolerance is something that has to be constantly reflected upon and confirmed. By everyone. It has to be fought for and confirmed whenever peace is made, everywhere.

Finally, a vision

Tolerance is an intermediate stage. That is seen most clearly by minorities, writers and thinkers. At a conference on tolerance in Lucerne, Switzerland, held from 13 to 15 March 2002, the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas formulated his vision for a better future: "In a truly free society, tolerance is unnecessary, since the interests of citizens with equal rights can be sorted out in reasonable discussions. If some group suffering discrimination, for example women, were to be truly equal in law, they would no longer need to be tolerated."