Tolerance in Utopian Discourse

Monika Brzóstowicz-Klajn

Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Institute of Polish Philology, Collegium Maius, Ul. A. Fredry 10, 61-701 Poznań, Poland

karylla@amu.edu.pl

Abstract

In this article, the problem of tolerance is discussed with regard to some of the most important utopias in the European tradition, namely by Thomas More, Tommaso Campanella, and Francis Bacon. This allows us to show these works from the point of view of hidden paradoxes. Utopian discourse, on the one hand, creates models of static, unchangeable, more or less homogeneous societies that remain separated from the world. On the other hand, tolerance means an attitude of openness towards diversity

monika brzóstowicz-klajn

and, thus, towards dialogue as well as the possibility of change. Nevertheless, tolerance within utopias appears under certain conditions. The article attempts to show how it is captured in particular utopian works and what additional meanings it reveals. The problem of tolerance can be a criterium for criticizing the utopian projects. This is the case with the twentieth-century concept of an open society by Karl Popper and with critical statements about it made by Leszek Kołakowski and Ryszard Legutko.

Keywords: tolerance, utopian discourse, open society, absolute ethics.

———————————

Toleranca v utopičnem diskurzu

Povzetek

V pričujočem članku problem tolerance obravnavamo z ozirom na nekatere izmed najpomembnejših utopij znotraj evropske tradicije, in sicer na spise Thomasa Mora, Tommasa Campanelle in Francisa Bacona. Takšna zastavitev nam omogoča, da tovrstna dela prikažemo z vidika skritih paradoksov. Utopični diskurz, na eni strani, ustvarja modele statične, nespremenljive, bolj ali manj homogene družbe, ki ostaja ločena od sveta. Na drugi strani, toleranca pomeni držo odprtosti za raznolikost in, potemtakem, tudi tako za dialog kot za možnost spremembe. Kljub temu se toleranca znotraj utopij pojavlja pod določenimi pogoji. Članek skuša pokazati, kako jo zajamejo posamezna utopična dela in kakšen dodatne pomene razkriva. Problem tolerance lahko postane kriterij za kritiko utopičnih projektov. Na takšen način je mogoče razumeti koncept odprte družbe Karla Popperja, izhajoč iz izkustva dvajsetega stoletja, in kritične misli o njem, kakršne sta podala Leszek Kołakowski and Ryszard Legutko.

Ključne besede: toleranca, utopični diskurz, odprta družba, absolutna etika.

Given the rigid model of socio-political relations it embodies, Utopia at first glance seems to be incompatible with tolerance.[1] And yet, in modern visions of the ideal state and society, we can see a kind of interplay between Utopia and the notion of tolerance, whose meaning within this field of play is defined and valued in various ways. It can be argued that, to some extent, the idea of tolerance co-constructs the utopian dimension of the imagined societies. Yet, tolerance in Utopia remains difficult to be expressed unambiguously because it signifies openness to diversity and, thus, to dialogue and the possibility of change. Classical Utopia, in contrast, is a model for a static, more or less homogeneous society that is no longer evolving but rather ahistorical and closed. The sketches of Isaiah Berlin in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* deconstruct the foundations underlying portrayals of Utopia. Referring to Kant, Berlin writes: "Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made." (Berlin 1997, 19.) He indirectly suggests that the inequalities in human nature require our acceptance of that which is imperfect and different. The need for tolerance emerges from such an understanding of humanity and a feeling of solidarity that arises precisely because of these differences. It is not tolerance that creates a community, although it is a needed element, but the recognition of a shared responsibility for the community, a willingness to cooperate, set common goals, and consent to necessary compromises despite differences, and, in many cases, a diversity of experiences.

233

On the other hand, Utopia is based on a moral and intellectual universe marked by total compliance, uniformity, and social harmony. Berlin demonstrates the flaws of such a system. He contrasts monistic utopian philosophy with a pluralism of values, cultural horizons, and visions of the world, which inevitably conflict with one another. Hence, the need for tolerance, dialogue, and compromise that have no place in Utopia. And yet, the idea of tolerance can be found even here. What does tolerance mean in Utopia, and under what conditions is it possible? Do the principles, on which tolerance rests, give rise to dangers? Are they always automatically linked with a position

---

1 The present essay discusses selected literary utopias. Its limited size does not allow it to address fully the corpus of texts that represent the history of images of the ideal state. It also omits, on principle, anti-utopian texts, since the aim here is to address the possibility of the existence of tolerance in positive projects in the context of utopian discourse.

of interpersonal solidarity? How do tolerance and solidarity contribute to our ideas about a well-organized social life?

Religious tolerance on the island of Utopia

In the European tradition, tolerance, alongside anthropocentrism, economic transformation, the Reformation, rationalism, and the development of liberal thought, has become a well-entrenched principle postulated within society. In Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), a foundational work for modern European Utopia and the idea of solidarity, there is no concept of tolerance. However, we find several remarks devoted to religious tolerance. For the modern reader, these remarks represent a kind of play with the notion of tolerance as a recognized value. In More, the interplay between tolerance and Utopia does not challenge the idea of a monistic worldview as a basic principle for an ideal society:

234

> There are several sorts of religions, not only in different parts of the island but even in every town; some worshipping the sun, others the moon or one of the planets. Some worship such men as have been eminent in former times for virtue, or glory, not only as ordinary deities, but as the supreme god. (More 1997, 71.)

However, this vision of the pluralism of beliefs is shattered later in the text, when More writes: "yet the greater and wiser sort of them worship none of these, but adore one eternal, invisible, infinite, and incomprehensible Deity" (ibid.). The above description is reminiscent of the image of a single Christian faith, in which, besides the belief in one God, there are minor cults of the saints. This belief system is so similar to Christianity that the Utopians are very eager to be baptized once Hythloday and his companions begin to preach the gospel to them.

Stephen Greenblatt uses *Utopia* and other writings by More to show the complexity of his personality and his tendency to play with fictitious constructions that are useful for maintaining his high socio-political status in

the royal court of the King of England.[2] Preserved documents and writings show that, for More, political life was essentially an absurdity that required from the ruler the ability to impose his own fictions. Everything could prove to be uncertain, apparent, and ambiguous because it was based on irreconcilable differences in perspectives. This would also include the status of the vision in *Utopia*, the ambiguity of which can be seen in the name itself (*eutopos*— "good place," and *outopos*—"no place"), which also holds true for the notion of tolerance.

More's vision of religious tolerance is based on pluralism limited by the predominant homogeneous vision of the world, intrinsic to the dominant philosophy of the state, understood from a metaphysical perspective as the beautiful, wise, and harmonious work of a Supreme Being. Freedom of choice remains subject to certain conditions: 1.) no religious rites can invoke disregard for other denominations or cause unrest among people; 2.) there is no consent to atheistic beliefs; they will be severely punished. Utopia is, in fact, governed by a deeply religious concept of life that defines the entire system. It assumes the natural origin of (at least) the most important moral norms. These norms are known to every human being regardless of their faith, without God having to reveal them; a human being realizes them by means of reason through the experience of reality, which in itself is the work of the Creator. Hence, for example, advancements in the study of medicine provide the Utopians with a deep spiritual experience. They discover the hidden order in nature as "one of the pleasantest and most profitable parts of philosophy" (More 1997, 56).

235

On the one hand, tolerance means a prohibition against violence as an unethical form of action (though atheists are punished). On the other hand, it is also a temporary concession in the name of a future unity of faith, in which rationality is that which is in accord with the essence of creation.

According to Jean Berenger's diagnosis of the problem of religious tolerance in Europe between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries,[3] a new attitude toward heresy appeared in the Catholic Church during the Renaissance, which departed from extreme intolerance and severe punishment that derived from

---

2 Cf. S. Greenblatt 1980, 11–73.
3 Cf. Bérenger 2000.

the doctrine of St. Augustine. For him, heresy was a crime against God. Any diversity in beliefs was difficult to accept since faith was linked to the idea of the unity of the Church and state. It required recognition of heresy as a threat to the established social order (i.e., the doctrine of Justus Lipsius of the Netherlands, who proclaimed that religious pluralism leads to anarchy and even ruins the states). Bérenger notes that other Churches, especially the Calvinists and Lutherans, were also intolerant. More's writings reflected the spirit of his times, as tolerance in the sixteenth century was still a matter that was not so much personal and private but social and political. With humanism came the first Renaissance theorists of tolerance, such as Sebastian Castellion, who treated tolerance as a temporary solution, until personal example or persuasion (but without inhuman violence or discrimination), or the decisions of the anticipated Council of Trent, led to the return of the unity of faith. Because of the rise of individualism and the associated pluralism of worldviews in the public sphere, gradual changes taking place in the philosophy of knowledge (in particular, Giambattista Vico's and Pierre Bayle's approaches to history),

236 and the negative effects of religious wars on the stability of the state a number of important works on tolerance appeared in the seventeenth century: John Locke's *A Letter Concerning Tolerance* in 1667 (tolerance is a demand of reason, not merely freedom of conscience), Baruch Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in 1670, and Pierre Bayle's *Commentaire philosophique sur ces Paroles de Jésus-Christ: contrain-les d'entrer* in 1686, which later provided a model for Voltaire.[4]

This may explain why More is so inconsistent in writing about tolerance in Utopia[5] or, rather, why he plays with the notion of tolerance. More

---

4 Later, a revolution in philosophy was made through the works of Kant, whose categorical imperative treated issues of morality as decidedly individual, entirely dependent on the free choice of the individual acting independently of all natural or socio-cultural factors. Thus, faith in the existence of natural sources of morality, which is so important for More, is rejected. There is no morality without individuality, and, consequently, without pluralism and tolerance.

5 Over time, under pressure from the rise of individualism, various Christian denominations began preaching tolerance at the most basic level, namely, allowing one to hold any faith, other than Catholicism, in the name of freedom of conscience, but without the possibility of public practice. This intermediate level of tolerance allowed

understandable are, thus, also his generally monistic visions of an ideal state, in which there is no need for openness to that which deviates from the general social unity. We can find such utopias in the most famous utopias, including Tommaso Campanella's *The City of the Sun* (written in 1602, published in 1632) and Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (written in 1624, published in 1627). Campanella's work is known primarily as an example of the total subordination of the individual to the state on the model of religious discipline. Religion in this project remains unified with secular authority (centered in one supreme figure, the Metaphysician), monotheistic, and organized around the worship of the Sun-God, based in many aspects on the doctrines of the Christian faith. However, Christ and the Twelve Apostles are worshiped in the City of the Sun only as superhumans alongside other great heroes and pagan gods, including Moses, Pythagoras, Lycurgus, Caesar, Hannibal, Osiris, Jupiter, and Mercury.[6] In *New Atlantis*, in contrast, Bacon holds out great hope for science and modern means of organization, which become an inherent element of the state's institutions. The sages of the most important institution on the island— Solomon's House—are greatly revered. Religious questions are resolved through faith in an apostolic revelation that occurred centuries earlier and was witnessed by the entire community of New Atlantis and is still accepted by all. The island is a Christian nation. What provides its inhabitants with an inner order and prosperity, is a secular science that cares not for the needs of the soul

237

for private religious practices, but not public ones (temples without bells and squares outside of the town centre); however, accepting the privacy of the choice of religion eliminated restrictions on holding office or purchasing land and abolished privileges on the grounds of religion. This was first guaranteed in Europe by the so-called Edict of Toleration of 1781 issued by the Habsburg Emperor Joseph II, which recognized that faith, in accordance with natural law, was a matter of individual conscience and no authority had control over an individual's conscience. Therefore, one should protect the state against false dogmas, support one's own religion, and resolve disputes concerning faith through persuasion, not by means of terror or force. The highest degree of tolerance at the end of the eighteenth century allowed for full freedom in the public sphere as well, and was introduced in the Edict of Tolerance by Leopold II in 1791.

6 This sounds heretical: Campanella seems to see the origins of religious worship in the worship of great legends and heroes. In the writer's time, these concepts were known among the libertines in Italy and France.

but of the body. The Solomon House, a major research center that organizes modern studies and the development of science and technology, constitutes the source of the unity of life on Atlantis. The Monarch and the Senate oversee the organization of life. Still, it is the work of an independent community of scientists working with the ruler that ensures inner harmony and provides an orderly, objective image of the world accepted by all. This knowledge, based on the concept of one truth, expresses unity. Outsiders in these utopias can be tolerated as guests under certain conditions. But if they want to stay, they need to assimilate fully.

The works of More, Campanella, and Bacon offer images of a homogeneous society. They also testify to the diversity in the world that was growing increasingly palpable during the Renaissance, along with an increase in travel and new geographic discoveries, which reinforced the transformations taking place on the European continent. The Reformation and the rise of national languages were disrupting the old order. Moreover, travelers and sailors were discrediting the old—once viewed as exhaustive—catalog of minerals, plants, and animals. They showed that there were still many unknown species and forms. A reflection of this state of things can be seen in Campanella: the City of the Sun is surrounded by many rings of walls, each containing drawings, which are the basic source of information about the order of the world, its nature, structure, flora, and fauna: "On the fifth interior they have all the larger animals of the earth, as many in number as would astonish you. We indeed know not the thousandth part of them." (Campanella 2008, 11.) In Bacon, too, there is a need to constantly advance science, to collect new information, including facts about the world beyond New Atlantis. The experience of a changing image of the world seems to have been a gateway to the city/state of Utopia. The concept of an ideal state was, in part, a response to this situation.[7]

---

7 Plato's *The Republic* represents, among other things, the philosopher's individual response to the crisis of Athenian politics, an attempt to counter the dissolution of the traditional sacred image of the world, in which social divisions, patterns of life, and the system of values remained deeply rooted in divine law. In the face of the old order's desecralization, Plato attempts to reconstruct a coherent whole by combining the plane of existence of an ideal society with the life of an ideal individual and the transcendent plane.

Emil Cioran interprets Utopia as a "fall into time"—that is, into history, which is opposed to the beauty of eternity. History separates humanity from the absolute, the original unity; in history, humanity creates an incoherent multiplicity—a source of evil. Utopias are, in this sense, a futile attempt to counter this fall and immerse ourselves in time.[8]

The utopia of tolerance achieved: the concept of the open society

In Poland, during the economic and political transformations that followed the collapse of communism, various democratic models for governing society grew in importance. Particularly inspirational were the ideas of Karl Popper, especially his work of political philosophy written during World War II, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945). In a search for a counterbalance to the totalitarianism that was then rampant, especially fascism, the philosopher created a vision of a liberal democratic state. Its society was characterized by an ideal attitude of openness to that which was Other or Alien. Openness became a synonym for tolerance. It was supposed to protect against violence and all social evil, not only between the state and the individual, but also on the level of interpersonal relations, outside of the institutional realm. This would be possible by adapting critical rationalism as a basis for life, as opposed to Utopian rationality, which was tainted by the sin of abstraction in its goals and the error of seeking all-encompassing methods. The genuine rationalist rejects the notion that knowledge and reason have a claim to power in society. He/she is aware of the limitations of his cognitive abilities and, like Socrates, knows very well that knowledge is born only in discourse with others, from which the equality of all people derives. Reason provides the glue that holds this together. In other words, reason stands in opposition to the instruments of power and violence. It is a means by which power and violence are limited. By concentrating on particular, concrete solutions, dialogue shows that tolerance is a fundamental condition for the functioning of an open society.

Popper's *The Open Society and its Enemies* is not a traditional literary utopia; rather, it represents an anti-utopian philosophical discourse, which is

239

8 Cf. Cioran 1998.

opposed to various forms of totalitarianism, identified with a particular line of European thought, especially that of Plato, Hegel, and Marx. It is in these thinkers that Popper perceives dangerous threads of utopian thinking. Utopia, viewed in this way, is the cultural source of totalitarianism.

Popper's criticism of the concept of utopianism, however, points first to its simplistic dichotomous division between a closed society (understood as totalitarian) and the open society of liberal democracy—a society of free individuals who embrace the principle of tolerance as fundamental to coexistence, who are capable of dialogue and guided by rationalism (understood by Popper in a strictly defined way) in an effort to reach compromises.

For Leszek Kołakowski, the "open society/closed society" dichotomy is impossible to maintain. It is itself a false and utopian opposition (in the sense of being incompatible with the nature of reality). In his essay "The Self-Poisoning of the Open Society" (originally published in *Czy diabeł może być zbawiony* [*Can the Devil Be Saved*]; 1982), he states that the basic assumptions and values of the Popperian ideal, if implemented consistently, would paradoxically lead to their opposite, that is, to totalitarian forms and solutions. In other words, Kołakowski accuses Popper of not taking into account the "internal enemies" of the open society: internal threats that are inherent to its nature, the potential for the self-poisoning of society, the fact that the consistent realization of liberal principles transforms them into their opposite. The assumed need to defend those who are weaker against a ruthless free market, in which the stronger triumphs, can lead to an over-protective state, which, in the name of concern for social justice, will implement solutions that limit individuals and the free market.

It is equally difficult to maintain the principle of equality; we should speak instead of ensuring equal opportunities because its maximalist conception would require taking children from their families and raising them on equal terms in dormitories, in order to overcome the inequalities in their opportunities resulting from differences in their natural social environment. In terms of the question of tolerance and independence from tradition, an open society, like any other, cannot exist without tradition. The process of upbringing without authority is incompatible with human nature and the needs of living individuals. Kołakowski explains:

To educate people to be tolerant and unselfish, to overcome tribal customs in favor of universal moral standards, cannot be done without the strong base of a traditional authority, which up till now has derived from the great universal religions […] the institutions which make the survival of the pluralist society possible—the legal system, the school, the family, the university, the market—are attacked by totalitarian forces using liberal slogans, in the name of freedom […] unlimited freedom for everyone means unlimited rights for the strong or, according to Dostoyevsky, in the end, absolute freedom equals absolute slavery. (Kolakowski 1990, 172.)

Tolerance, however, does not necessarily mean indifference and the disintegration of social bonds. Kołakowski sees how difficult it is to defend the pluralist order without using methods contrary to its essence. But he believes in the existence of a boundary, beyond which we destroy the open model of social life. Pluralism does not mean that there are no defined values; it is not free of valuation. It requires a kind of heroism resulting from being conscious of the values that underlie the pluralist order and from a psychological readiness to defend them.

Pluralism can lead to the degeneration of the principle of tolerance. Democracy must remain in a precarious balance—constantly revalorized in response to specific social, political, and other situations—, a balance between relativism and absolutism. Kołakowski's text about the self-poisoning of the open society was written in 1979. When Poland began the process of democratization in 1989, it became a common experience to discover the dark side of liberal democracy distorted by the manner, in which it was implemented in post-communist societies. At that time, the utopianism of Popper's concept was rediscovered all the more powerfully.

In his 1994 book *Etyka absolutna i społeczeństwo otwarte* [*Absolute Ethics and an Open Society*], Ryszard Legutko expressly advocates the need to recognize absolute values. He accuses Popper, among others, of focusing exclusively on procedural issues rather than on values. Legutko then describes the ideas of traditional politics formulated by Plato in *The Republic* and Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. These works indicate the chief task of

politics, which is to realize the supreme good that takes precedence over the good and goals of individuals. Even liberal thinkers of the past (such as Adam Smith or Benjamin Franklin) recognized that, beyond the existence of a free market and the principle of unrestricted economic activity (*laissez-faire*), there was a higher capitalist ethics. Ethics was superior to the principles of the free market. The coexistence of diverse groups and attitudes meant that, by necessity, there would be constant conflicts and a need for negotiations or struggles to achieve consensus, which consisted of recognizing one of these attitudes and worldviews as dominant and ruling.

Consequently, tolerance was understood passively—as refraining from violence against the Other, the Alien. This is the concept of negative tolerance derived from the work of Locke and Voltaire. Yet, John Stuart Mill introduced a new, active understanding of tolerance—it was positive, based on engagement and fighting for the freedom to that which deviates from the norm. This concept later co-created, according to Legutko, a utopia that was no longer liberalism but libertarianism. Its vision of society was to be similar to that of a department store, offering different ideas, patterns, and values commercially. From this perspective, we can see how two ideas of tolerance and interpersonal solidarity can be distinguished. Legutko emphasizes that an absolute ethics, an absolute good, was replaced by an individually defined notion of good suited to one's private purposes, which the conservative author claims is attractive to religious and sexual minorities. There should be no conflicts or negotiations; the best solution is an even greater diversity that eliminates tensions and operates according to the principle of absolute freedom of choice (hence, the similarities between libertarianism and anarchism, though one cannot be equated with the other). This leads to a schizophrenic situation: within the group, in which he/she functions, the individual accepts its internal and ideological order, as well as its underlying universality. In social relations outside the group with a wider, diverse, and equal society, they accept moral and ideological relativism, free of any hierarchy. This ultimately destroys the inner bond between the individual and their group and leads to the acceptance of relativism as the only credible solution and nihilism. This will destroy both true diversity and the identity of the individual, leading to the disappearance of culture, which, Legutko emphasizes, must be based on universally recognized values.

Tolerance does not have just one meaning; as one of the basic principles of interpersonal coexistence and politics in an open society, it can paradoxically lead to a "terror of tolerance." This is the case when it ceases to function in connection with the idea of solidarity and with such virtues as understanding, compassion, kindness, responsibility, tact, good manners, justice, generosity, or curiosity about the world.

One can disagree with Kołakowski's critical approach to Legutko's conservatism. Still, their considerations independently lead to the conclusion that, alongside postulates and procedures, in our efforts to achieve tolerance, the importance of solidarity and responsibility must also be emphasized at both the social as well as the economic levels, and, even more broadly, at the existential level. Without this, the principles underlying tolerance will not strengthen our sense of security and social justice, which are essential to us.

Bibliography | Bibliografija

Bérenger, J. 2000. *Tolérance ou paix de religion en Europe centrale (1415–1792)*. Paris: Honoré Champion.

Berlin, I. 1997. *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Campanella, T. 2008. *The City of the Sun*. Radford, VA: Wilder Publications.

Cioran, E. 1998. *History and Utopia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Greenblatt, S. 1980. "At the Table of the Great: More's Self-Fashioning and Self-Cancellation." In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, 11–73. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kolakowski, L. 1990. "The Self-Poisoning of the Open Society." In *Modernity on Endless Trial*, 162–172. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Legutko, R. 1994. *Etyka absolutna i społeczeństwo otwarte*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Arcana.

More, T. 1997. *Utopia*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Popper, K. 2020. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.