

TOLERANCE – A REWRITING

To the true believer

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The word “tolerance” cannot be uttered without its counterpart – intolerance – springing to the mind. More often than not, we come across intolerance. Although people have tried to make rules and regulations that should preserve it, tolerance remains more of an ungraspable ideal.

As good and evil coexist, tolerance and intolerance pervade the history of mankind (from its very beginning). Their intertwining has given rise to war and peace, to eons of prosperity, but also to dark ages of destruction. Intolerance has made people to wage war against one another, whereas tolerance has always put an end to war as a soothing painkiller. Most of us know what tolerance is, namely “indulgence for belief or practices differing from one’s own”, and yet we have all slept, at least one night, in the Procustean bed of intolerance, because of fear, or cowardice, or carelessness, or evil-mindedness. The spirit of whoever lies in that bed will be distorted, mutilated, as intolerance is levelling, uniforming diversity, difference, differentness, otherness.

But why can we not accept other people’s beliefs or practices? It may be because we find other people’s beliefs threatening to our identity, ideology, power or because we consider their possessors (either pagan or) inferior to us.

Since tolerance and intolerance are so closely interrelated, it has always been difficult to strike a balance between them. When one does not succeed in striking this balance, the result is abuse, whether physical or mental.

In his biographical book entitled *Castellio* – which was translated into Romanian as *Un strigăt împotriva morții* (*A Cry against Death*) – Stefan Zweig states that Hume and Locke were credited as the first ones to have announced the idea of tolerance in Europe, but in fact this is not true because in 1554 Sebastian Castellio wrote a brochure *Contra libellum Calvinii* (*Against Calvin’s Tyranny*). It seems that history is ungrateful because it effaces the names of those who had the enormous courage to take the first step and thus open a

way. “History only looks at victors and overshadows the defeated; these unknown heroes are unscrupulously buried in the tomb of oblivion, nulla crux, nulla corona”, the writer sadly remarks.

The century that has just passed was much concerned with tolerance, although its first fifty years have seen two world wars and because of that some have called it the most terrifying century so far. Towards the end of the twentieth century, in the year the Wall of Berlin was finally destroyed, *A History of the World in 101/2 Chapters* was published. Its author, Julian Barnes, does not simply relate ten episodes of the conventional history that is taught in schools, but creates fictional history which seems to consist of simple, intriguing, disconnected stories, sophisticatedly told. But on carefully reading the book, we discover gradually that they echo each other. There are recurrent images, and themes seem to deepen throughout the story.

One of these recurrent images is that of the stowaway, which is present from the very first chapter, entitled simply *The Stowaway*. It is the account of the Flood that a woodworm aboard Noah’s Ark gives us. Noah’s account is thus turned upside-down to reflect not the tolerance to diversity represented by the animal kingdom that we find in the Bible, but the intolerance manifested towards some of the animals.

An analysis of intolerance reveals the evils that form its corollary: discipline (uniformity), tyranny, abuse, and violence. They can all be found on Noah’s Ark in Barnes’ story.

In this first chapter tolerance is dealt with at three levels. In the first place it should have been tolerance inside the story. But there is none. There is only Noah’s intolerance directed towards the animals and which is hinted at when the narrator tells us that “there was strict discipline on the Ark”. Discipline, not harmony, as pictured in “those nursery versions” painted in wood; moreover, strict discipline is the first element in the corollary of intolerance. Further on, the narrator mentions the “locks”, “punishments and isolation cells”, elements that restrict and constrain,

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that limit freedom which goes hand in hand with tolerance. "A prison ship", says the stowaway – and the image of the prison/imprisonment to which widespread "ratting to the authorities" is added contradicts the idyllic picture of the salvation ship, a ship that was destined to the survival and perpetuation of all the living species on earth. Actually, it was not a single ship, but a flotilla that consisted of eight vessels of which some were lost, the stowaway goes on. The most painful loss is that of Varadi's ship, Varadi being Noah's youngest son. Varadi did not much take after his father, as he had a sense of humour and "it was said that his ark was run on much less tyrannical lines than the others". The crucial word is "tyrannical" which leads us to the second component of intolerance: tyranny. Noah could not tolerate his youngest son's behaviour who "would slap the quadrupeds affectionately on the rump". It is the typical reaction of a man who wanted to transform the majority into unanimity and impose his "own little theories" on others that are independent and show a line of behaviour that seems to diverge from his. Therefore, he found a way to eliminate Varadi as he spent too much time "fraternizing with the beasts". We do not know what this way was, but the fact is that his ship "vanished from the horizon, taking with it a fifth of the animal kingdom". This defenestration is shrouded in darkness and mystery, and the official explanations provided by Noah and the remaining sons cannot either shed light upon it or exclude doubt.

The stowaway goes on with his report about the Voyage by revealing that "characteristically they didn't tell us the truth". Lie and manipulation had been used so as to embark the animals on the vessels. Obviously, Noah had to lure the animals and he advertised a sort of a beauty contest for pair, the prize being a cruise. But again, not every species was chosen, because some of them would have endangered the success of the Voyage (the narrator being a sample in point) and others were rejected because "well, what difference do a few extra rings round the tail make?"

At this stage – the embarkation – Noah is presented as a man who "loftily refused to negotiate" and who "had his little theories and he didn't want anyone else's", which is proof enough of his intolerance: being blinkered by his own beliefs, being confined to his own truth which he holds as absolute. All he wants the others to do is to "blindly obey". Why not? It is the easiest thing to do: you do not have to think, you do not need to feel, there is no remorse.

And the vessels set sail. The Voyage starts.

It is at sea that Noah shows his true colour. "It's amazing what fear can do", notes the chronicler. Fear, terror, interdiction. If you cannot tolerate this, forbid it,

and then you can punish the disobedient. Animals are not allowed to be ill or to leave their quarters. But they are allowed to be eaten by Noah and his family. This is the explanation for the extinction of some species, especially the mythical and fantastic animals. The mechanism of terror is operating by means of "more extermination than was strictly necessary for nutritional purposes". The stowaway has an insight of Noah's intolerant nature and confesses: "We began to suspect that Noah and his tribe had it in for certain animals for being what they were". Noah cannot stand some of the animals because they are crossbreeds, but most of all he cannot stand the unicorn because it is so different (i.e. strong, honest, fearless, impeccably groomed) from him who is "bad-tempered, smelly, unreliable, envious and cowardly".

Intolerance is the result of rigidity which is not unfamiliar to Noah who is six hundred years old; and "six hundred years should have produced some flexibility of the mind, some ability to see both sides of the question". But he would not accept any other view or opinion than his own. That is why the vessels are built of gopher-wood.

The story ends (and life goes on) with an optimistic view: the stowaway-storyteller looks on the bright side and thinks everything is for the best: "There were seven of us stowaways, but had we been admitted as a seaworthy species only two boarding passes would have been issued".

Before this end, there is a warning against forgetfulness (the ungrateful history that disregards the unknown hero such as Castello) which is two-edged: on the one hand, it helps you carry on, but on the other, it makes you "end up believing that bad things never happen", the consequence being that "you are always surprised by them". And the story could not really have ended without dismantling intolerance, without ridiculing it, and rationally demonstrating it is not well-grounded: "Now, it's true that Noah couldn't have predicted how long his voyage was going to last, but considering how little we seven ate in five and a half years, it surely would have been worth the risk letting just a pair of us on board. And after all, it's not our fault for being woodworm."

The narrator's attitude is the third level at which tolerance occurs. Throughout the story we feel a strong voice speaking freely as the narrator does not owe his survival to anyone, and consequently he does not have to omit the unpleasant details of the journey ("They were chosen, they endured, they survived: it's normal for them to gloss over the awkward episodes, to have convenient lapses of memory. But I am not constrained in any way. I was never chosen. In fact, like several other species, I was specifically not chosen".), nor is he

forced in any way to alter the truth of the story ("When I recall the Voyage, I feel no sense of obligation; gratitude puts no smear of Vaseline on the lens. My account you can trust"). I said the narrator's voice is a strong one, not a loud one. Its strength is due to the truth the narrator wants to reestablish and to his frankness, his way of telling it in such a direct way that it debunks the myth of the Flood. This voice undermines the substance of the old text in the Bible; it is subversive, but free and sincere, and above all, reliable as it comes from an independent witness that was not the advocate of any doctrine. The strategy against intolerance is not the open fight (it is of no avail when you are such an insignificant creature as a woodworm) that Castelli adopted, but the artfulness of being a stowaway, an invisible creature that subversively eats the wood your ship is built of. If you want to survive in freedom, first you have to hide, to

stow away, and afterwards you can deconstruct the official truth, the conventional history with sensible arguments, and plead for tolerance.

We have so far spoken about tolerance and intolerance, at the level of the narrative, inside the story. Going outside it, the book may be considered a test of tolerance for readers, as it challenges and puts to doubt our most sacred beliefs. A second perspective on the same event annuls the rigidity of the first description; being able to see both sides of the question is enough evidence that people's minds have become more flexible and there is an opening for tolerance. By Julian Barnes' book, the tolerance in the Bible has been counter-balanced by intolerance. Two symmetrical points of view face each other and show us they can coexist. And that is a question of tolerance.

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