

Introduction

Tolerance is one of the most prominent ethical principles of modern society. Hardly any other term is used so often by politicians, sociologists and media representatives. It is considered the guiding virtue of democracy, without which a free and pluralistic society is not possible. At the same time, tolerance is acutely endangered in late modernity by the advance of autocratic, authoritarian and illiberal political models. Obviously, many people feel overwhelmed by the open society with its high degree of political, cultural and ideological differences and long for a homogeneous social space. We assume that the understanding of the principle of tolerance must evolve against this background in order to respond adequately to the widespread unease.

Further development of the concept of tolerance

The majority of authors locate the origins of the idea of tolerance in early modern political theory, which was shaped by humanism, by the search for peace in the face of religious wars, by revolutions, and by liberalism. Within this framework, they consciously or unconsciously draw on the intellectual model of the social contract situated in this epoch, which calls for tolerance above all with regard to the stability and freedom of a community. Thus, then as now, it is usually described merely as a theory of flagrant conflict, as a social technique of coexistence under friction and disturbance. These theories do not shed any light on the run-up to and the emergence of conflict.

This explains why these approaches, as correct and important as the consideration of acute conflicts is, ultimately fall short, because they extinguish a fire that possibly need not have arisen in the first place. For it is inadequate to conceive of tolerance only in terms of appropriate behavior in the event of conflict, whether as toleration of another view (passive tolerance) or as defense against massively intolerant, for example racist or anti-Semitic, behavior (active tolerance). Much more important is how tolerance can have a preventive effect in the run-up to escalating conflicts. This crucial dimension of tolerance – we refer to it in this volume as