World Philosophy Day 2016

Round table "Speak up together for Tolerance",
UNESCO Headquarters, Paris, France, Room II, 2-5 pm

Moderator: John Crowley, UNESCO Division of Social Transformations and Intercultural Dialogue

Introductory remarks:
Nada Al-Nashif, UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Social and Human Sciences

Speakers:
Catherine Audrain, Chaire UNESCO d'étude des fondements philosophiques de la justice et de la société démocratique, Université du Québec à Montréal
Tom Rockmore, Distinguished Professor, University of Beijing
Dandan Jiang, Associate Professor, Shanghai Jiao Tong University
Lionel Veer, Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to UNESCO

That more tolerant societies are generally speaking a good thing, and likely to be more conclusive than intolerant societies to the human rights, inclusion and development values of the international community, is clear enough. However, an extensive philosophical tradition, with multiple strands, leaves considerable uncertainties as to the nature and limits of tolerance and to the social conditions that favour or impede it.

One set of issues that deserve further discussion is the fluid but nonetheless perceptible distinction between "tolerance" and "toleration", and the fact that the lexical map is different in different languages. In particular, this distinction does not exist in French - at least verbally.

While the distinction is not entirely clear-cut, the history of usage of "tolerance" in English points in the direction of an individual disposition (which may also be applied by analogy to collective or cultural patterns) that is comparatively untroubled by differences of life forms, worldviews and specific cultural attributes. Whether this disposition is best understood psychologically or sociologically, whether it is admirable or not (as it sometimes said, pejoratively, "a liberal is someone who doesn't take his own side in an argument"; by contrast, it can be argued that there are some things that no one, however tolerant, should tolerate), whether it can be taught or otherwise promoted through public policy - these are some of the questions that this understanding of tolerance throws up.

By contrast, "toleration" (in part no doubt because of the influence of John Locke's 1689 Letter Concerning Toleration) tends to refer to a mode of public order - a constitutional principle according to which the state finds it politic (whether for normative or pragmatic reasons) to express indifference with respect to certain forms of belief and belief-anchored practice. Again, a wide range of very familiar questions arise within this tradition: about liberalism and its limits, about the bounds of toleration (Locke excluded atheists and Catholics from its benefit: multiple versions of this kind of boundary exist in other contexts), about the difference or resemblance between toleration and principles such as "laïcité" embedded in other philosophical and political traditions, etc.

Furthermore, there is a cross-cutting question how tolerance and toleration (as thus understood) relate to one another. A familiar historical argument is that toleration creates the conditions for tolerance. But it is equally common the find the opposite argument that toleration can function only when tolerance already exists. And of course, the problem can be stated in conceptual rather than in historical terms. The centre of gravity of the round table discussion is thus proposed to be how individual dispositions relate to the social order, which is in turn of critical significance for all UNESCO activities designed to promote tolerance or to fight against intolerance in its various manifestations.