

# Toleration as the Central Plank of Modern Democratic State

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**Abstract-** *This paper took a critical look at toleration as the central plank of modern democratic state. There are diversities in a democratic state that manifest differences in language, values, attitudes, lifestyles, religion, dress, custom, tradition, physical appearance, interests and speech. This shows the heterogeneous nature of the modern democratic state which can pose danger to civil peace without toleration. Not recognizing and respecting the rights and beliefs of other people who have divergent views are the major cause of intolerance. This work argues that toleration is an indispensable tool for democratic sustainability. In order to give the topic the adequate explanation that it deserves, we employed analysis. The paper is concluded with the suggestion that being tolerant remains the key to resolving political and religious tension and differences in a democratic state.*

**Keywords:** *Toleration, Central Plank, Modern, Democratic State.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Wars have been fought and people have been killed in large numbers simply because of the unwillingness of some people to put up with others and to accept views, opinions, positions or behaviours that are different from their own. Some people try by all means to make others behave the way they behave and think the way they think but this is out of the question. We are all human beings but we are different in everything, viz. physical, intellectual, emotional, social and personality -related aspects. How can we live together in peace with people that have these different qualities? Here, toleration comes in because if we are intolerant, we shall see other people and what they do as nonsensical. The implication is that there is nothing that they will do for us to be satisfied with. It is when we tolerate others that we can accept their deficiencies and when this is done, there will be harmony and unity. We are different in all aspects of life and cannot exhibit the same type of behaviour.

One of the problems that we have in Nigeria today is intolerance. We hear and see how people lose their

lives in all the parts of the country because of intolerance. For example, on 21<sup>st</sup> may, 2025, there was a report that a 22-year old woman, Zainab Muhamadu faced death sentence as a result of her conversion from Islam to Christianity. She was accused of apostasy. Others are Church attacks and Mosque attacks. There is intolerance in Nigeria because of religious extremism. Some Muslims believe that Islamic religion is the best. So, they do everything that is humanly possible to convert others to their own religion. Some Christians also want to convert the adherents of traditional religion to Christianity. Whether Islamic religion, Christian religion or traditional religion, the major thing is to rehabilitate people and bring them closer to God. None of these three religions teaches that we must believe in man, all of the religions teach that God is the creator of both living and non-living creatures. We hear of Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al-shabaab in Somalia and East Africa, Al-Qaeda- a global network of terrorist organizations, Terik-i-Taliban in Pakistan, Taliban in Afghanistan, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) etc. because of intolerance. If we take what others are doing as a wrong thing, how do we know that what we are doing is the right thing? We should be tolerant and that leads to the question, what is tolerance or toleration?

### Meaning of Toleration

Toleration is the willingness to accept opinions, ideas, behaviours, beliefs, lifestyles, choices and attitudes that are contrary or different from our own. Etim (2005), defines tolerance as the ability to bear with one another in spite of differences either in opinion, belief or knowledge. For him, tolerance is an indispensable factor for any meaningful progress and development of any nation. This is true because development cannot take place where there is conflict and without toleration, conflicts are bound to exist everywhere. Tolerance is a fair and objective attitude towards others and is usually a conscious effort from the individual. It is the ability to encounter and endure something that is different or contentious

without voicing negative opinions (study.com). Tolerance was introduced in the early 15th century from the Latin word *tolerantia*. This word was originally meant to endure hardship or provide support. It was also used as a French word around the same time and had a similar meaning. In 1765, it became associated with its more modern meaning. Around this time, it began to mean a tendency to be free from the judgement of others (study.com).

Tolerance has been considered for a very long time now as cardinal virtue of liberal political theory and practice. That is why it has been endorsed by important political philosophers as John Locke, John Stuart Mill and John Rawls and it is central to a variety of contemporary political and legal debates including those concerning race, gender and sexual orientation (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/toleration>). It is because of the relevance of toleration that the United Nations (UN) international day for tolerance is annually observed on November 16, to educate people on the need for tolerance in society and to help them understand the negative implications of intolerance. For Rawls, several questions should be distinguished. First, there is the question whether an intolerant sect has any title to complain if it is not tolerated; second, under what conditions tolerant sects have a right not to tolerate those which are intolerant; and last, when they have the right not to tolerate them, for what ends it should be exercised (1999, p.190). An intolerant man will say that he acts in good faith and that he does not ask anything for himself that he denies to others. His view is that he is acting on the principle that God is to be obeyed and the truth accepted by all. This principle is perfectly general and by acting on it he is not making an exception in his own case. As he sees the matter, he is following the correct principle which others reject (Rawls 1999, p.191).

This is not true because the intolerants always use force to make people comply with their demands and it is the use of force that causes chaos, pandemonium and confusion in the society because force is not a corrective principle. John Locke gives three reasons which are philosophical in nature to show that force should not be used to encourage people to adopt religious beliefs. First, he argues that the care of men's souls has not been committed to the magistrate by either God or the consent of men. His second argument is that since the power of the government is only force, while true religion consists of genuine inward persuasion of the mind, force is incapable of

bringing people to the true religion. Locke's third argument is that even if the magistrate could change people's minds, a situation where everyone accepted the magistrate's religion would not bring more people to the true religion. Many of the magistrates of the world believe religions that are false (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke-political/#TOL>). Locke's belief in freedom of belief forms the basis of his view of tolerance

John Stuart Mill defends and promotes toleration of thought, speech and individuality as a way to promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. He argues that we should tolerate the individual differences and the individuals should be allowed to pursue their own good in their own way. Mill states that the object of his essay is to assert one very simple principle and that principle is that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self protection. He further says that the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. That his own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. For him, over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign (Mill, 1991, p.14)

Mill argues that no society is free if liberty of thought and feeling (liberty of conscience), absolute freedom of opinion and sentiment, liberty of expressing and publishing opinion, do not exist absolute, unqualified and are not on the whole respected no matter what may be its form of government. The best freedom according to him is the one that allows us to pursue our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it (Mill 1991, pp.16-17). In his words: This one branch is the Liberty of Thought: from which it is impossible to separate the cognate liberty of speaking and of writing. Although these liberties, to some considerable amount, form part of the political morality of all countries which profess religious toleration and free institutions, the grounds, both philosophical and practical, on which they rest, are perhaps not so familiar to the general mind, nor so thoroughly appreciated by many even of the leaders of opinion as might have been expected (Mill, 1991, p.19).

For a better understanding of this discourse, let us take a cursory inspection of the story of some blind

men brought to feel an elephant physically with their hands in order to know what an elephant was like. In their description, the one who held the elephant on the leg said that an elephant was like a big tree, while the one who held the ear said an elephant was like a big fan. The one who held the tail said an elephant was like a big rope and so on and so forth. In this instance, there is sense in what each of them was saying, since each of them was describing an elephant according to the part of the elephant that he was holding. It was not possible for any of them to hold the whole of the elephant with his hands, and therefore the knowledge of the elephant that each of them felt was fragmented and limited to the aspects of the elephant that he was holding (Elom 2006). This as it were is a good analogy that illustrates the way different people of different religions, conceive God. Each of these religious groups describes and tries to conceive God in the aspect they perceive Him. In actual fact, it is impossible for any man or any religion to grasp God in His entirety, since knowing him is a mystery (Elom, 2006).

If this is the case, why is it that we cannot tolerate and love each other? Why cannot we see what we are doing as something that is directed towards achieving a common goal? In politics, we should be tolerant; we should not see those in other political parties as enemies provided that what they do is not in conflict with the law of the land. Democracy cannot work well without toleration. The opportunity for political participation, political equality and the possibility of an alternative government make a state democratic in form. For democracy to work successfully, certain additional conditions are necessary. Foremost among these is the widespread habit of tolerance and compromise among the members of a community, a sense of give and take (Appadorai, 2004, p.138). This is necessary because democracy involves the conception of majority rule, and the acquiescence of the minority in the decision of the majority. If either presses its demands at the expense of the other, democracy becomes difficult to work. Such a temper can exist in a society only if there is a general agreement on fundamentals among the members thereof; it is difficult to secure if there are deep cleavages concerning their fundamental institutions (Appadorai, 2004, p.138-139). It is difficult, for instance, to secure compromise where a strong minority believes passionately that private property is theft, whereas the majority believes in its sanctity. That is why political theory has agreed with Mill that it is in general a necessary condition of free

institutions that the boundaries of governments should coincide in the main with those of nationalities. The sense of belonging together creates a readiness on the part of the members of a state to subordinate their differences to the common good (Appadorai, 2004, p.139).

#### Toleration: An Indispensability

If things are bad today in a democratic dispensation, then they were worse yesterday in other systems of government like military rule, plutocracy, aristocracy, gerontocracy, oligarchy, diarchy, fascism, totalitarianism, autocracy etc. That means that democracy is better than other forms of government in the sense that it recognizes, promotes and protects freedoms like political freedom, economic freedom, social freedom, personal freedom, majority vote, individual rights, respects for privacy and opposition. How can we observe the above values if we are not tolerant. Toleration compels us to accept diversity, opposition and differences but not observing it in today's democratic states results in the ills that bedevil democracy.

To Hegel, "what is rational is actual and what is actual is rational." A consequence of this phrase is that once a government has come into existence by whatever mode or route, that government is actual and rational, and thereby good; no one should think or act to destabilize the government (Momoh, 2005, p.15). This suggests that we should be tolerant of a government not minding whom the constituents are. Momoh further adjures members of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria to do the following mental arithmetic: withdraw from Nigeria what you give or contribute to Nigeria and see how Nigeria will suffer immediately, mediately and ultimately. Also imagine Nigeria withdrawing what she gives to you and the consequences of that withdrawal. Ditto for members of the minor ethnic groups. You will find that the answer you will get is that you need Nigeria. This is not to say that anyone should put up with injustice, oppression, inequity and iniquity, and undemocratic monopoly of political power (Momoh, 2005, p.20). This means that Momoh is calling on people to be tolerant because it is a cardinal virtue of modern democratic state.

Nweke notes that the significant action of political class is total disrespect for opposition and desire to suppress those who oppose it. This prevalent lack of accommodation of politicians create tension and

panic in the political system as opponents are charged for revenge/ attack at little provocation. In a bid to exist, each group engages in battle ready posture on engaging in political activities (2006, p.54). There are three expression of tolerance which include acceptance of diversity, respect for diversity and appreciation of diversity. Acceptance of diversity implies that members of different groups should not interfere with each other or their practices; rather, they should accept their presence in the society. Respect for diversity means seeing different group as morally and politically equal even though they may differ fundamentally in beliefs, practices and lifestyles while appreciation of diversity means viewing different beliefs, practices, or lifestyles as something that is intrinsically valuable and worthy of esteem

(<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical>).

Politics deals with human relationship just like religion and any case where people are not... [tolerant] about this, it can be a source of conflict in a country or society. This brings into focus of some religious groups who claim they are born to rule. And that they are meant to be of the top of any government whenever they find themselves (Elom, 2006). Another regrettable factor that have contributed immensely in precipitating religious intolerance are the politicization of religion and religionization of politics (Etim, 2005, p.55). There is undeniably so much passion sometimes attached blindly to religion that can be powerful, portentous and destructive especially when channeled with ignorance and anger. Sometimes this passion so blinds the adherent to the inconsideration of other people's feelings in pursuits of their evangelistic mission. Such inconsideration on either side of the divide is bound to ignite bad blood, suspicion and even eventual violence (Etim, 2005). For instance, a Christian preacher in a Muslim suburb who attacks Islam and its followers as good only, for hell fire; and the Islamic preacher who spits fire on the Christians as infidels in the name of preaching; or the Christian evangelist who incites youths to destroy traditional religionist shrines and forced them to denounce their faith their wishes. These kinds of attitude would certainly ignite repulsive reactions among the sects (Etim, 2005).

In a democratic state, there should be a room for different opposing and conflicting interests to be tolerated by the existing democratic institutions in order to create a balance and a more tolerant society.

Some of the things that we should tolerate in a democratic state include our political differences, viz. differences in political affiliations and political parties, religious differences, cultural differences, criticisms, differences in opinion and choices, differences in our interests and perceptions. In a democratic state, there should be multi political parties. A good democratic state is not known for one party system. None of the political parties should see the other as an enemy but should tolerate their different political activities. We should also be tolerant of our various religious differences and affiliation. Christians should tolerate the traditionalists and Muslims, traditionalists should tolerate Muslims and Christians while Muslims should equally tolerate Christians and traditionalists. Our cultural differences should also be tolerated. Every ethnic group has their own language, customs, beliefs, values, dress code, mores etc. that differ from that of others. To live together with people that differ in the above mentioned values and ways, we should be tolerant.

Also, people sometimes criticise opinions that are different from theirs but this is not good provided that it is constructive. Views and opinions that differ from our own should be tolerated. Opposing views and ideas should be respected in democracy. "Besides, we need to learn to be more accommodating of other people's ideas. Recall that the sophists who greatly influenced Athenian education were not Athenians themselves. But because they were accommodated, they contributed to the glory of Athens. We should learn to be more tolerant of others' ideas, though we need not swallow them hook, line and sinker" (National Teachers Institute, 2005, p.17). We also have differences in our choice. Sometimes we choose what others do not like but that should not make us to be enemies. Tolerance also has a greater role to play in our differences of interests and perceptions. Most people do not tolerate when others have interests that are in conflict with theirs. When two or more people desire the same thing which both of them cannot have at the same time, there will be conflict in their interests. Conflict of interests can also result in different ways that people perceive things. The way I perceive something is not the way another person perceives it and that should not make me to be intolerant.

One question that should be answered is whether there is any condition that the tolerant sects have the right not to tolerate the intolerant. Rawls (1999)

answers that there is at least one circumstance that the tolerant sects have the right not to tolerate the intolerant and that condition is when intolerance is necessary for their own security. The reason he gives is that justice does not require that men must stand idly by while others destroy the basis of their existence. He further states that while an intolerant sect does not itself have title to complain of intolerance; that its freedom should be restricted only when the tolerant sincerely and with reason believe that their own security and that of the institutions of liberty are in danger. The tolerant should curb the intolerant only in this. The leading principle is to establish a just constitution with the liberties of equal citizenship (Rawls, 1999, p.193)

## II. CONCLUSION

All human beings are created by the same creator despite the fact that we are from different countries and continents. Therefore, we should teach tolerance, preach tolerance and practice tolerance. For tolerance to be fully observed in a democratic state, dialogues, discussions, negotiations and interactions should be adopted. We should start from the family to teach children to be tolerant. A child who is tolerant in the family can also be tolerant outside the family. Tolerance is a unifying principle in the society that can help to preserve authority and promote peace. So, we should tolerate each other irrespective of our differences in politics and religion to diminish the possibilities of conflict. Other areas that need tolerance include our cultural differences, different political affiliations, opposing views, diverse opinions and ideas. Being tolerant remains the key to resolving political and religious tensions and differences in a democratic state.

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