



Voices of Tolerance

This is an important place. In fact, I believe everyone on the planet should visit Ons' Lieve Heer op Solder. Not because it represents the perfect ideal of tolerance. It does not represent that. The Catholics who worshipped here in the 17th century did so behind a kind of mask. The facade of this building is a mask, is it not? It hides what is behind it. The building pretends to be something it is not. The Catholic citizens of Amsterdam were allowed to worship here, and in other "hidden churches" around the city, provided they did it semi-secretly, without show. Now, that is hardly an open celebration of faith, of diversity. It is, you might say, a pale tolerance. Imagine, today, a school that has a mix of black and white students, but the black students have to use a secret door in the back. We would call that the opposite of a tolerant, modern sensibility.

But wait. At the same time that those Catholics were worshipping here, witches were being burned in England and in America. An Irish Catholic woman in Protestant Boston was hanged for being "obstinate in idolatry." That meant she refused to deny her Catholic faith. So they tied her to a plank, lit a fire and burned her alive. They burned her alive for being a Catholic. Indeed, in the 17th century intolerance was official policy all over Europe. Most people of that time held that in order for a society to be strong its members had to have one system of beliefs. Religion was the glue that held a society together. For a nation to be comprised of people who held different core beliefs about the nature of God, or which day of the week to worship, or whether ordinary people should read the Bible themselves was considered a recipe for chaos.

Yet the Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century flourished: it defied conventional wisdom in Europe by crafting a groundbreaking policy of religious tolerance. And not only did it not descend into chaos, it became, arguably and improbably, the most powerful nation in the world. And Amsterdam became, briefly, the center of everything: commerce, science, publishing, ideas, modernity. The Dutch, in other words, showed everyone else in the world that they were spectacularly wrong. It has taken some centuries for the truth to be recognized, and many today are still not willing to recognize it.

But, again: a pale form of tolerance. This building does not represent the celebration of religious diversity, but something more like "putting up with."

I think this kind of tolerance is part of the Dutch identity. It goes all the way back to the Middle Ages and the battle against water. The polder model is real. People built up dams and dikes, creating land where there was none. Every member of society had to work to maintain this system. This resulted in a political system and a mentality that valued consensus over everything else. You couldn't say, "We have 60 percent of the vote, so we don't care about the other 40 percent." You needed everyone, or you would drown.

That means that, in the Netherlands, life is never black-and-white. Decisions are never truly decisive. Foreigners have a hard time with one Dutch word. Well, we have a hard time with many Dutch words.

But one in particular. *Gedogen*, I say when I am asked, means something like “technically illegal but officially tolerated.” I am an American, and America is a land that prides itself on decisiveness. Americans believe that you are either right or you are wrong. For an American, *gedogen* is difficult to comprehend. But the concept is an ideal tool in a society that places a high value on giving every person a stake in the outcome. You see this over and over in Dutch history: with coffee shops, or prostitution, or the *Verzuiling* system.

Many foreigners make the mistake of thinking that Dutch tolerance means permissiveness: let’s party!

Or they think Dutch tolerance means the Dutch are wiser than everyone else. But the Dutch of the Golden Age were not better than everyone else; they were not idealists. I think in fact the Dutch are less interested in issues than they are in keeping peace among themselves. I don’t think Calvinism or Catholicism is the true Dutch religion. I think *gedogen* is the Dutch religion. This is what happened in the 17th century, when they debated religion. Some wanted to ban Catholic worship for fear that it would disrupt society. Others insisted on the principle of religious openness. And both sides got their way: Catholics could worship in the city, but they mustn’t make a fuss about it.

Do it behind closed doors, behind an ordinary facade. We’ll grant you your freedom of worship, but we don’t want to see it. Thus this building expresses the essence of Dutch tolerance. It is a limited thing. And yet, in a way, it may be the truest form of tolerance. “Celebrating diversity,” which is such a proud phrase in our time, has, to me, a hollowness in it, as if one were admiring a bouquet of different flowers. Whereas Dutch tolerance has within it that life-or-death necessity of the medieval farmers and fishermen standing with their ankles in muddy water. It isn’t lofty, but it is as honest as mud.

And we should all pay attention to it. For the position the Dutch were in a millenium ago is precisely where we all are today. The world has gotten smaller and more dangerous than ever. With the climate changing and the seas rising, with fundamentalisms threatening, we don’t need to celebrate diversity. But we do need to tolerate each other, to accomodate, to find ways to fit our different sensibilities under the same roof. Ons’ Lieve Heer Op Solder, with its soaring Catholic architecture hidden behind a workmanlike Dutch canalhouse facade, isn’t just a quaint remnant of the past. It is a piece of practical wisdom. We’re going to be needing a great deal more of that.



MUSEUM

Ons’ Lieve Heer
op Solder