



# Year of Tolerance

Interview with Dr. Claude Vishnu Spaak



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### **In your mind, what does tolerance mean?**

Tolerance is a fundamental value for binding people and allowing them to live together peacefully and harmoniously in a multicultural political community, wherein groups of people have different ways of life, specific beliefs, customs, traditions, values, etc. Thus, tolerance is an overarching value that each individual from a society should share regardless of his or her own cultural differences, with a view to respect, promote and even learn about the values of others who live in the same society.

I think that when one reflects on tolerance, it is very important to distinguish this notion from mere indifference. As we know, more and more societies in our contemporary globalized world are becoming increasingly multicultural. In light of this fact, one could think, too easily perhaps, that each society should aim merely at having its communities not interact with each other and only take care of themselves without really showing interest for the way people from other communities live and think. This, I believe, is not enough. Tolerance must also have a much more positive aspect to it: tolerance is not just about peaceful non-interference with others, it is about living side by side with a stronger sense of integration: tolerance implies being curious about others, wanting to learn from their otherness, and also to share with them what we are, our own outlook, values and beliefs. So tolerance is about both curiosity and generosity, and it is through this positive outlook on tolerance (which makes it much more than just a form of polite indifference), that one can promote a truly pluralist society, where people not only live peacefully, but also in political friendship and harmony.

### **What are the key values of tolerance that you hope students will learn?**

Voltaire once wrote about tolerance that "it is a necessary consequence of humanity. We are all fallible, let us then pardon each other's follies. This is the first principle of natural right". I believe that there lies in this quote a deep insight about the values

of tolerance that one should teach to students. Tolerance is of course about being curious and open-minded towards others who do not have the same culture, beliefs, traditions, as our own. Yet, it is also more than that: it is about being able to accept and even promote the right that others have to continue believing things and having practises that sometimes go against what I believe or what I practise.

So the profoundest value of tolerance, and also the most difficult one to learn, is the ability to refrain from judging the other, and to resist a natural tendency to refuse differences, but on the contrary to remain open to them, while welcoming the possibility of changing oneself through the interaction with other ways of thinking. Tolerance is an essential pedagogical value because it helps students learn how to think in an open-minded way while overcoming all kinds of prejudices and preconceived ideas; through tolerance one learns the virtues of critical thinking and of creativity, which are essential assets on the road to intellectual freedom.

### **Why is it important that students learn the values of tolerance from a young age?**

It is a well-known and documented fact from the psychological sciences and education studies that an individual's system of beliefs starts to shape at an early age. Thus, it is all the more important to educate children and young adolescents not only to read, write, count, etc., but also to reflect about and be mindful of the key values that structure life in society. It is certain, from this perspective, that the values of tolerance should be part of this corpus of essential values, and it is extremely important to channel them through education, both at school and through the family, which also plays a vital role.

While it is never too late to learn the values of tolerance, one should not forget that our identity starts to shape at an early age. This is why it is necessary to teach tolerance to students at a young age, when children are at the maximum of their learning abilities, full of curiosity and desire to know, and while they are themselves naturally tolerant.



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