

# TOLERANCE

E. M. Forster

Surely the only sound foundation for a civilisation is a sound state of mind. Architects, contractors, international commissioners, marketing boards, broadcasting corporations will never, by themselves, build a new world. They must be inspired by the proper spirit, and there must be the proper spirit in the people for whom they are working. . . .

What though is the proper spirit? . . . There must be a sound state of mind before diplomacy or economics or trade conferences can function. But what state of mind is sound? Here we may differ. Most people, when asked what spiritual quality is needed to rebuild civilisation, will reply “Love.” Men must  
10 love one another, they say; nations must do likewise, and then the series of cataclysms which is threatening to destroy us will be checked. **A**

**R**espectfully but firmly, I disagree. Love is a great force in private life; it is indeed the greatest of all things: but love in public affairs does not work. It has been tried again and again: by the Christian civilisations of the Middle Ages, and also by the French Revolution, a secular movement which reasserted the brotherhood of man.<sup>1</sup> And it has always failed. The idea that nations should love one another, or that business concerns or marketing boards should love one another, or that a man in Portugal should love a man in Peru of whom he has never heard—it is absurd, unreal, dangerous. It leads us into perilous and  
20 vague sentimentalism.<sup>2</sup> “Love is what is needed,” we chant and then sit back, and the world goes on as before. The fact is we can only love what we know personally. And we cannot know much. In public affairs, in the rebuilding of civilisation, something much less dramatic and emotional is needed, namely, tolerance. Tolerance is a very dull virtue. It is boring. Unlike love, it has always had a bad press. It is negative. It merely means putting up with people, being able to stand things. No one has ever written an ode<sup>3</sup> to tolerance or raised a

1. **French Revolution . . . brotherhood of man:** The French Revolution, which lasted from 1789 to 1799, had the motto “Liberty! Equality! Brotherhood!”
2. **sentimentalism** (sən'te-mən'tl-iz'əm): a tendency toward too much tender, often shallow emotion.
3. **ode** (ôd): a usually formal poem on a serious subject.

## Analyze Visuals ▶

In what way does the painting illustrate **tolerance** among different people?



## Play Audio

### **A** PERSUASIVE ESSAY

Reread lines 1–11. According to Forster, what is needed to create a sound foundation for civilization?

## Language Coach

**Oral Fluency** Part of reading aloud fluently is correct pronunciation. In words ending with *-gue*, the *g* is pronounced /g/, and the *-ue* is silent. Read aloud the full sentence in lines 19–20, paying attention to pronunciation.


“Civilization is a method of living, an attitude of equal respect for all men.” From the series *Great Ideas of Western Men* (1955), George Giusti. India ink and gouache on paper, 24 1/8" x 18 1/16". Gift of the Container Corporation of America. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. Photo © Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C./Art Resource, New York.

statue to her. Yet this is the quality which will be most needed after the war. This is the sound state of mind which we are looking for. This is the only force which will enable different races and classes and interests to settle down

30 together to the work of reconstruction. **B**

The world is very full of people—appallingly full; it has never been so full before, and they are all tumbling over each other. Most of these people one doesn't know, and some of them one doesn't like; doesn't like the colour of their skins, say, or the shapes of their noses, or the way they blow them or don't blow them, or the way they talk, or their smell, or their clothes, or their fondness for jazz or their dislike of jazz, and so on. Well, what is one to do? There are two solutions. One of them is the Nazi solution. If you don't like people, kill them, banish them, segregate them, and then strut up and down proclaiming that you are the salt of the earth.<sup>4</sup> The other way is much less  
40 thrilling, but it is on the whole the way of the democracies, and I prefer it. If you don't like people, put up with them as well as you can. Don't try to love them: you can't; you'll only strain yourself. But try to tolerate them. On the basis of that tolerance a civilised future may be built. Certainly I can see no other foundation for the postwar world. **C**

**F**or what it will most need is the negative virtues: not being huffy, touchy, irritable, revengeful. I have lost all faith in positive militant ideals; they can so seldom be carried out without thousands of human beings getting maimed or imprisoned. Phrases like "I will purge this nation," "I will clean up this city," terrify and disgust me. They might not have mattered when the world was  
50 emptier: they are horrifying now, when one nation is mixed up with another, when one city cannot be organically separated from its neighbours. . . .

I don't then regard tolerance as a great eternally established divine principle, though I might perhaps quote "In my Father's house are many mansions"<sup>5</sup> in support of such a view. It is just a makeshift,<sup>6</sup> suitable for an overcrowded and overheated planet. It carries on when love gives out, and love generally gives out as soon as we move away from our home and our friends and stand among strangers in a queue<sup>7</sup> for potatoes. Tolerance is wanted in the queue; otherwise we think, "Why will people be so slow?"; it is wanted in the tube,<sup>8</sup> or "Why will people be so fat?"; it is wanted at the telephone, or "Why are they so deaf?"  
60 or conversely, "Why do they mumble?" It is wanted in the street, in the office, at the factory, and it is wanted above all between classes, races, and nations. It's dull. And yet it entails imagination. For you have all the time to be putting yourself in someone else's place. Which is a desirable spiritual exercise.  **D**

**B PERSUASIVE ESSAY**

Why might Forster's repetition of "this is" be considered a persuasive technique? Explain.

**C ANALYZE REASONS AND EVIDENCE**

What reasons and evidence has Forster given so far to support his message about tolerance?

**D PERSUASIVE ESSAY**

Reread lines 52–63. Think about why Forster might have chosen to include commonplace complaints. How effective are they at persuading you to agree with his position?

4. **salt of the earth:** the finest or noblest people. The expression derives from a statement in the New Testament of the Bible (Matthew 5:13).

5. **"In my Father's house are many mansions":** Heaven is a place of diversity. The quotation is from the New Testament of the Bible (John 14:2).

6. **makeshift:** a temporary substitute for something else.

7. **queue** (kyoo): a chiefly British expression for a line of people.

8. **tube:** a British term for the Underground, or London subway.