

This workshop uses the history of “toleration” from the 15th century Ottoman empire to the contemporary world to explore basic concepts in history as well as the fundamental tools historians use such as primary sources to produce stories about that past. Toleration is a broad concept that has stood at the center of Western liberal thought for over four centuries from English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) to American political philosopher John Rawls (1921-2002). As a concept, toleration is linked to other core concepts in the western liberal tradition including liberty, freedom, and individualism. Not surprisingly, History as a discipline was also shaped by a celebration of these ideals. Many historians have used “toleration” as a yardstick to assess and interpret different cultures and historical periods. We will not only examine the history of toleration as an ideal, but also as a practice. Studying the way cultures have—and have not -- practiced toleration will lead us to a variety of sources that tell us a great deal about how social boundaries between groups are shaped by religious practices, dress, marriage customs, food cultures, and even rituals surrounding death.

Human experience is particularly likely to create traces in the archive when it results in something problematic or worthy of note (something that ends up in a police report, a court case, or even a comment to a friend in a letter). Thus, the history of toleration will inevitably lead us to narratives with which it is inextricably entwined – the violence and brutality of racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, homophobia, and imperialism. In the final section of the course, we’ll bring what we’ve learned about doing research and thinking like historians to bear on the history of toleration in the university, with a special focus on the history of Rutgers in the twentieth century.