Although the history of tolerance as a philosophical and pragmatic concept does not seem to extend much further back than the age of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, there is plenty of evidence that medieval thinkers and writers often harbored similar ideals. Tolerance however, has never been an attitude broadly espoused by a whole society, not even in modern western societies. In fact, in the best of all cases throughout history, only a few outstanding individuals have truly fought for tolerance, whereas others mostly paid only lip service to tolerance in face of an intolerant majority. Since tolerance has always faced serious challenges by fanatics, religious groups, churches, governments, parties, and other powerful institutions throughout history, it seems most appropriate to investigate those few sources available to us from the Middle Ages that can more or less be identified with tolerance in the modern sense of the word. Of course, in most cases we will observe only ‘toleration,’ an acceptance of the other in the form of co-existence, not a true tolerant attitude that embraces the other as a viable alternative to the own belief system, ideology, or philosophy which is not postulated as an absolute. In this paper, after a cursory discussion of a few solitary voices from the eighth through the thirteenth century, I will focus on one major thirteenth-century Middle High German courtly romance - Reinfried von Braunschweig - and two contemporary narratives - Konrad von Würzburg’s Partonopier und Meliur and the anonymous Die Heideninne - as testimonies of toleration, or perhaps even of atti

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1 I would like to express my gratitude to Constant J. Mews and C. Stephen Jaeger for their valuable criticism and suggestions of my paper.
2 Schreiner 1990; for a classical critique of the ideological idealization of the Enlightenment, see Adorno & Horckheimer 1969.
3 For theoretical and historical studies on tolerance, see Wierlacher 1996; Laursen & Nederman 1998; Watanabe 2001; Levine 1999.
4 For a full discussion of this complex, see Classen 2004.
tudes of tolerance in late-medieval German literature. These few voices might not represent a true paradigm shift, but they could be regarded as important indicators of a broad move in the general attitude toward ‘others,’ especially at a time when empirical knowledge about foreign cultures and peoples began to compete energetically with traditional, theoretical (learned) knowledge.⁵

As a starting point for our theoretical discussion, however, I would like to turn to the first and fourth paragraph of Article One in the UNESCO Declaration of Principles on Tolerance, proclaimed and signed by the Member States on 16 November 1995:

Tolerance is respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human. It is fostered by knowledge, openness, communication, and freedom of thought, conscience and belief. Tolerance is harmony in difference. It is not only a moral duty, it is also a political and legal requirement. Tolerance, the virtue that makes peace possible, contributes to the replacement of the culture of war by a culture of peace.

Consistent with respect for human rights, the practice of tolerance does not mean toleration of social injustice or the abandonment or weakening of one’s convictions. It means that one is free to adhere to one’s own convictions and accepts that others adhere to theirs. It means accepting the fact that human beings, naturally diverse in their appearance, situation, speech, behaviour and values, have the right to live in peace and to be as they are. It also means that one’s views are not to be imposed on others.⁶

Bearing these fundamental observations in mind, which are not limited in their meaning and application to any particular people or cultural and historical period, and which instead address a broadly conceived ideal for all of mankind, we can turn to the Middle Ages and investigate whether at least similar and related ideas were ever formulated and discussed in public and to what extent medieval attitudes of toleration bore the seed of modern tolerance in them. Both today and in the past the concept of tolerance can only be described as an ideal of how people of different races, religions, genders, and races.

⁵ Kühnel 1993 (421-22) refers to the replacement of “Toposwissen” (knowledge based on topoi) through “Beobachtungswissen” (empirical knowledge) by authors such as Fulcher of Chartres, William of Tyre, Marco Polo, Bertrandon de la Brocquière, and Gabriel Tetzel; for an insightful discussion of *curiositas* as a positive value since the late Middle Ages, see also Münkler 2000, 232-40.