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The Coexistence of Religion and Civility: One without the Other

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In recent years, namely the post-9/11 era, religion has been attacked on the basis that it promotes incivility. There has been a large effort to remove religion from schools, sports, and even community-based activities. The claim is that these groups and institutions want to remain unbiased and treat all faiths equally. However, what they are really doing is denying all faiths the right to practice their beliefs for fear that conflict might ensue. This argument raises the question, “Can religion and civility coexist?” Sociologist of Religion Peter Berger states, “I suspect that, in the aggregate, religion is more likely to have negative consequences for civility—that is, that religion, more than not, tends to create conflict both within and between societies” (qtd. in Frydenlund). This is a viewpoint held by many, and while they have supported this notion by using instances of religious radicalization, these illustrations actually discourage the claim, as radicals have become politically motivated and, as a result, have lost sight of their beliefs. Therefore, it suggests that not only can religion and civility coexist, but they can also actually go hand-in-hand; religion can encourage civility, while being civil can safeguard religious practice.

Civility can be defined as being courteous and showing respect for others in a socially acceptable manner. Therefore, religious civility is acting in this way in regard to the beliefs of others, whether the two parties believe the same or not. Religion, like politics, is one of those areas where people feel strongly. They believe they are right, and anyone else who does not agree, or believes differently, is wrong. Some even believe that if they merely listen to the “other side,” then they might be swayed, or “corrupted.” This has become the mindset of many people in recent years. Right Rev. Eugene Taylor Sutton, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland, states that “We were taught the Golden Rule at an early age... Lately it feels more like ‘do unto others before they get a chance to do unto you’” (qtd. in Ribiat). What happened for this to change? A possible—but unlikely—motive would be the advancement in technology in the last half-century that has allowed for easier communication with peoples across the globe, exposing us more and more to multitudes who live, eat, and believe differently than we do. Some refer to this as the world “shrinking,” due to the seemingly close contact with these new peoples. However, while easy access would explain the plethora of knowledge of the existence of other cultures, it does not provide a logical basis for the reactions that have resulted.

In an interview with Paul Bloom, professor of psychology at Yale University, Interviews Writer for Vox Sean Illing sat down with Bloom to discuss the incivility and blatant cruelty of people of today and throughout history. During the interview, Bloom stated that he agrees that much of our incivility towards each other stems from “the fact that we don't see [each other] as people” (qtd. in Illing). However, he believes that the worst instances of incivility “are in fact because we recognize the humanity of the other person.” He sums it up by saying, “we treat them horribly precisely because we see them as moral human beings...and it terrifies [us].... [This] cruelty is born out of a loss of control.” Illing says that few have thought of this viewpoint, I likewise. Even so, maybe Bloom is right. Maybe when a person's religious practice comes under the control of someone else who is trying to dampen it so as to make its observance less noticeable—maybe its downplay is precisely what causes the incivility—not the presence of religion, but rather the absence thereof. The bottom line is that incivility does not result from religion; incivility results from other, past incivilities.

When in the presence of people of different beliefs, one might feel as though there can't possibly be any common ground. That isn't true, especially in regard to views on civility. There are a number of religions and faiths that have a saying, or rule, which states how a follower of said belief should act towards “others.” For example, in the United States of America, whose unofficial religion is Christianity, a well-known rule is the Christian “Golden Rule,” which states, “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets” (qtd. in Robinson). Many children are taught the rule from a young age, not for religious reasons, but rather because it is the embodiment of civility. This ideal is not, however, just a Christian philosophy. In fact, all of the five major religions of the world each agree on their followers' duty to civility; they simply use different words. For instance, Judaism, the precursor of Christianity, says, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah [law]; all the rest is commentary” (Vanloon). Again, while each saying does not state exactly the same thing, the similarity in their essence is uncanny. Likewise, these two texts demonstrate a strong sense of community in their respective faiths, intimating a beneficial side effect on surrounding groups.

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Two of the five major religions are polytheistic; they are Buddhism and Hinduism. These two faiths are also closely related, as they began roughly around the same time period and were practiced in close proximity to each other. Like Christianity and Judaism, Hinduism more or less has a “rule.” It states, “This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you” (Vanloon). This suggests that civility is not a law that, when broken, can be punished, but rather that it is a part of one’s moral character or code of ethics. Like Hinduism, Buddhism focuses on how one should not harm others: “Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful” (Vanloon). Again, these all involve treating others respectfully and civilly. So far, the core belief has been seemingly universal.

Lastly, Islam also has a doctrine on civility. In the Koran, the prophet Muhammad says, “None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself” (qtd. in Robinson). As tensions among Christians, Jews, and Muslims are often hostile, it is easy to overlook this common ground. Nevertheless, fundamentally, each of these monotheistic religions is very similar. They state clearly how members should treat their fellow man. So, what do all these similarities suggest? They suggest that, in all reality, there isn’t a reason for the majority of the world’s population to be uncivil. If everyone actually followed his or her own “Golden Rule,” then maybe the world would be a civil place.

It is common knowledge that people of faith are usually highly devoted to their beliefs. As demonstrated before, most religions have the belief of civility. This means that the notion of civility is there, yet it is simply not being acted upon. According to the Pew Research Center, roughly 80% of the world’s population makes up the five major religions previously mentioned, meaning that at least 80% of the world’s population at one time or another has knowingly (and willingly) been uncivil to someone despite having scripture opposing it (Hackett et al). It seems that Rev. Sutton’s words ring true. In response, Director of the Johns Hopkins Civility Initiative Daniel Buccino says, “We stay civil not because others are, but because we are,” (qtd. in Ribiat). This is the secret to remaining civil: being nice even when you don’t want to be.* Even George Washington agreed that one must lead by example, while not being hypocritical. Everyone is morally obliged to remain civil.

Being civil takes effort, an effort that most are not willing to put forth. As asserted before, allowing the other side the ability to speak their mind is often viewed as a sign of weakness, as if the first side were “giving in.” President John F. Kennedy disagreed, saying, “Civility is not a sign of weakness” (1961). Therefore, in recognizing that this action is not, in fact, “stooping to their level” but rather is actually “being the bigger man (or woman),” perhaps being civil might appear a bit more advantageous, even if that side simply humors them (although that isn’t quite civility). Every little bit helps. Fortunately, Earl Mathers, County Manager of Gaston County, North Carolina, has thought of a few simple rules for being and remaining civil. The first and foremost is to “allow the other person to speak and listen empathetically” (Mathers). One cannot understand the other argument if one has not bothered to listen to how and why the other side differs. Moreover, most people just want someone to listen to them; they will be more appreciative of opponents who are seemingly empathetic. The second is to “recognize that people aren’t always morally bankrupt or mentally defective if they disagree with you” (Mathers). This step would seem obvious to some. However, it is human nature, when faced with someone whose logic is contrary to one’s own and ostensibly backwards, to reject his or her thoughts because “no one in their right mind would think that.” Although it might appear that way sometimes, it is usually not true; one simply has to accept that. Finally, the third—and arguably the most important—rule to being civil is to “seek the common ground” (Mathers). No matter how different two people might be, odds are they have something in common, whether it is a political view, policy view, religious practice (as is aforementioned), or even something as trivial as movie preference. Civility is all about finding common ground. In other words, there is virtually no excuse not to be civil.

Throughout history, many governments have tried to encourage civility between parties either by putting it into law or by stating that citizens have certain freedoms to which they are entitled and upon which no one could infringe. An example is the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution which states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances” (qtd. in Murphy). Despite this, however, many non-Christians in the U.S. feel that specifically Christian values are deeply ingrained in everything we do. After all, the “Pledge of Allegiance” says, “under God,” even though many U.S. citizens do not worship the same god, worshiping many or even none at all. It was difficult even to find examples of religious civility that weren’t associated with Christianity. I suppose that Christians (and followers of other religions) occasionally forget to “practice what they preach,” omitting the inclusion of others—perhaps inadvertently—as do many religiously-affiliated governments.

In supporting the view that religion and civility can coexist, some examples of how religion has deterred possible violence in non-Western societies are necessary. A prime example is the “sacred city of Varanasi in India” (Frydenlund). Throughout its history, Varanasi has been revered, not only for its religious connotation, but also for its community-based functions. Sarah Frydenlund, researcher and lecturer in the Department of Cultural Studies and Oriental Languages at the University of Oslo in Norway, suggests, “This cultural ethos is practiced and ritually communicated in a specific religious fashion.” Because locals think of Varanasi so highly, no one dares disgrace it by being violent in its borders. If something

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were to happen to the city, then many would lose either their place of worship or their place of commerce—in some cases, both. Another non-Western suggestion of religious civility is a statement by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, first president of Pakistan:

You are free; free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed that has nothing to do with the business of the State.... We are starting with this fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one State.
(qtd. in Brown)

Again, like the first amendment in the U.S. Constitution, the application of this statement by the government to the denizens of Pakistan is probably not as inclusive as it should be. However, the idea conveyed is what is important: Civility is fundamental for the discussion and resolution of issues in any subject.

Venturing a little closer to home, a recent and distinct demonstration of how both religion and civility came together to keep the peace and preserve the value of humanity in a notable affair that has been mulled over many times demands our attention. On October 27 of last year, a man named Robert Bowers shot and killed eleven people in attendance at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Bowers was eventually shot by police and rushed to Allegheny General Hospital, where he was treated by a team of nurses and doctors, three of whom were Jewish, including Ari Mahler. Mahler is a trauma nurse and, in a Facebook post put up shortly after the mass shooting, stated that he was a member of the team that cared for Bowers and that he didn't mention his religion to Bowers. "I wanted him to feel compassion. I chose to show him empathy" (Mahler). Later, Bowers allegedly thanked Mahler for caring for him. There was no way for Bowers to know that Mahler or the other two members were Jewish, that they held different beliefs. Despite what Bowers had done a few hours earlier, Mahler and his colleagues were able to put aside their differences and treat Bowers with the utmost civility, acting according to their sworn oath.

In this instance, religion and belief did not inhibit their ability to be civil; if anything, their belief in the Hippocratic Oath allowed them to remain civil to the man who had just killed eleven others who practiced the same religion. Whether Bowers would have acted the same had he known Mahler and his colleagues were Jewish, we will never know. But as Mahler wrote in his post, "Besides, if he finds out I'm Jewish, does it really matter?" (Mahler). Does the religion or belief system someone follows change the way he or she treats others? I demonstrated earlier that the five major religions all hold the same belief on the issue of civility. Therefore, the answer is no; a person's faith doesn't change the way he or she treats others. One's faith does not condone cruelty, mass murder, radicalization, or incivility; it demands that he or she treat others fairly and with civility.

While it is my main focus, religion is not the only area where civility should be practiced. However, if we can be civil in just one area, then perhaps that will influence how we act in different situations. Perhaps we can be like Ari Mahler and his colleagues and listen to our adversaries and show them compassion, even though it might seem difficult due to our different beliefs; perhaps we can recognize each other's humanity and value it, not fear it. Perhaps we can be civil even when we don't want to be. We cannot remedy incivility with more incivility. Instead, we must choose to be civil in everything we do—perhaps the only cure for incivility. After all, civility is not a religious, political, or racial issue; it is a social issue, a human issue. It is not wanted; it is needed. Maybe then the world would be a better place.

Think about it.

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