Civil Asymmetry: How do we Practice Civility in a Religiously Pluralistic Society?

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Civility, when practiced as a democratic ideal, assumes a neutral political space where all involved have an equal voice. The political theorist John Rawls argued that citizens practice civility as a moral duty when they are able to justify opinions and decisions on fundamental political issues by referencing only public values and standards. For example, when deciding on the legality of gay marriage, a Supreme Court Justice would need to base his or her decision on standards that are public, not private. Because one or two opaque passages in the book of Leviticus cannot be a common standard for evaluating public policy in a pluralistic society, it is a violation of what Rawls terms “public reason” to impose such a religious truth on others. Expressions of political power must follow standards accepted by publicly available values—not one set of values over the other—in order to allow a space for the practice of civility to endure. My question, then, is the practice of civility in a pluralistic religious society really possible? Can we truly set aside a private value for the sake of public reason and a call to civility? To answer these questions, I will examine the common conflation of civility, politeness, and tolerance in order to not only challenge the discursive activities involved in these conversations, but also to provide an alternative way for students, faculty, and staff to practice civility in the reality of religious pluralism.

Let’s start with a common, even quotidian, occurrence in American life: the polite and kind, indeed civil, proselytizers who visit my home. They are woefully unaware that their kindness and civility can be interpreted as an insidious form of power and violence. They are afforded great privilege to come to my home without fear of reprisal to tell me that not only is it not okay to be me, but that I also risk eternal damnation if I do not become like them. Making matters worse, this privilege manifests at the beginning of each semester here at Virginia Tech when we are accosted by the very same type of civil and polite proselytizers. Can I be truly civil when these proselytizers tell me, en route to my car from West Ambler Johnston, and in front of my children no less, that my decision not to take their Bible will have ghastly eternal ramifications for my children’s well
being? Civility in this context infers power. They have a right to tell me that it is not okay to be me, in front of my children, but could we imagine the roles reversed? How can one remain “civil” in this context? Would a minority be afforded the same privilege as a majority? This asymmetrical relationship perforce denies even the possibility of true civility. Can we imagine those who enjoy this great privilege in society giving it up for the sake of true civility? Would you give it up?

To be civil is to be humble. To be humble is to recognize the limitations and idiosyncrasies that embody your sense of self, your sense of truth. We are unique, yet not really so unique. The philosophical discipline of phenomenology has done enormous work in the past few decades interrogating this idea. The late phenomenologist and celebrated teacher of ethics Emmanuel Levinas taught that in everyday life people have the tendency to reduce their relationships to a subject-object. Regrettably, this is not a form of humility. Nor, as I will argue here, is it a form of civility. It is a paradox. Even though we are unique sentient beings, we consistently classify and compare our experiences and relationships to others. To be unique, however, is beyond any assurances of comparison. Yet we still feel the need to compare. Why?

Civility, as an ideal, requires one to give up a sense of societal privilege when entering into a relationship or conversation. How does one do this when the religion governing an individual’s life is not only unwavering and absolute, but also, in many cases, one in which others must accept to be treated as equals? Fortunately, though, we have examples of those who have made this crucial step toward civility. Allow me to share one.

The late Krister Stendahl, a former dean of the Harvard Divinity School, a Swedish bishop, and a famed biblical scholar, worked tirelessly to encourage churches to be civil and tolerant. By recognizing civility, when practiced as a democratic ideal, as a foundation of religious belief, he, as a white Protestant male, fought for the ordination of women and members of the LGQTA community. He fought against the use of sexist language in liturgy and the study of scripture, once mentioning that Jesus’ maleness was no more significant than his eye color. He urged his co-religionists to discover truth in other religious traditions in a practice he termed “holy envy.” In an interview in 2003, he famously remarked, “In the eyes of God, we are all minorities,” which for him was “a
rude awakening for many Christians, who have never come to grips with the pluralism of
the world."

Majority societies do not put themselves under the microscope. Rather than focus
on what makes us similar (a Western Christian technique), we should focus on what
makes us different. Only those in a privileged position can “celebrate” difference. We
need to engage it in order to discover the practice of civility. Minorities remind the world
for the need for benevolence when ethics is divorced from politics. History exposes the
extremity of persecution emerging from modern society, technology, and culture. The
modern other is the continual reminder of this crisis. They were (are) persecuted. “To be
persecuted,” according to Levinas, “is to bear responsibility for everything and everyone …
to be responsible despite oneself.”

A self is concrete and particular. It engages
another self in reality. It happens. “Furthermore, it occurs as utterly particular: the self
is a particular person, and the face-of-the-other is a particular revelation of a particular
person.” What is hidden in this relationship is not theoretical, but rather one’s
responsibility to the other. We simply ignore the presence of the other face. We do this
to be civil. Sadly, “only the persecuted,” however, “must answer for everyone, even for his
persecutor.” Civility will only emerge after the persecutor accounts for himself. Sadly,
though, he does this by focusing on tolerance, not accountability. How, then, can we
change this focus?

I. Is Civility Tolerance?

The words “tolerance” and “religion” are tossed around so often in contemporary
American discourse that few stop and reflect on the meaning of them, especially in
relation to one another. The German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote that
“tolerance should be a temporary attitude: it must lead to recognition. To tolerate means
to insult.” Whereas the French writer Victor Hugo argued that tolerance is the “best
religion.” What does “tolerate” actually mean? Is toleration truly a goal or a virtue? Is it
possible that tolerating others is merely an expression of power? How does toleration of
other religions reflect these types of questions? Can one be civil in such discourse? My
sense is that most celebrate and practice Hugo’s view. Yet they are mistaken. Recognition,
in the Goethean context, requires such an element of humility and solidarity
with humanity that civility must remain ideal, not a practice. How many of you in this room are ready to give up the most important experiences, ideas, and beliefs that make up your sense of self in order to be truly civil? The idea that there is a best religion is an anathema to basic civility. Someone is enlightened, whereas someone else is not. Tolerance, on the other hand, is merely a propaedeutic toward civility.

To better understand this process, let us look to a tale from Greek mythology. Procrustes is not a widely known character of Greek myth, but, as we shall see, his story is helpful for us in navigating the labyrinthine discussions taking place on civility and inter-religious dialogue. A smith from the town of Attica, Procrustes (literally, “the Stretcher”) was pathologically sneaky and violent. He kidnapped random people and trapped them on his “iron bed.” In order to make his victims fit perfectly in this bed, he either stretched them out or cut off their legs. His iron bed is a useful and, at times, an appropriately violent metaphor for the craft of interpretation and critique. The term “Procrustean,” then, is employed to describe how people use their worldview to interpret events, violently fitting them into a singular political ideology, or theology, or cultural worldview.

Allow me to provide an example. While attending a summer solstice festival in Blacksburg, I observed how many of the people who attended the festival affixed to their clothing a bright orange sticker that said, “Guns saves lives.” Guns are an important part of Appalachian culture, so we should not be surprised that denizens of this culture feel a need to express their support for owning and amassing weapons. However, they made their public case for guns in a Procrustean manner: “Guns save lives.” Penicillin saves lives. Vaccines save lives. Defibrillators save lives. Guns are designed only for destruction or death. To argue that a tool designed for death “saves” lives requires a strong element of faith, not reason, because the statement itself is empirically untrue. Thus, any argument to the contrary will always be circular. Theirs is a conviction based on a paradox. Yes, we can argue about protection, among other things, but that is a statistics-based, empirical discussion—a call to “public reason.” There is, however, no absolute moral component to it. Yet to believe that guns save lives is inexorably woven into the narrative of Appalachian culture and society, and it is a moral imperative. The whole culture has a stake in this argument. Morality is unyielding. Faith in the argument
(however unreasonable) determines a person’s responsibility to his or her collective identity. However, we are unable to sort out any differences publicly if indeed the arguments are perceived as an extension of one’s identity or culture. Ideas, interpretations, criticisms, and worldviews morph into the people expressing them. Can public values really emerge? Where, then, is the space for dialogue? Worse, where is the space to practice civility?

These same stickers appeared at a rally on VT’s campus one day following the massacre of school children in Newton, Conn. After the murder of numerous children, this is what many in the community decided to rally behind? It makes sense because “guns save lives.” Should one be civil when an individual feels his basic ethical structure is under attack? How can civility ensue when a call to public reason falls silent? All the more so when confronting deeply held religious beliefs.

Similar questions bedevil our conservations about the place of religion in a public university. What exactly is religion? Depending on one’s procrustean (ideological, political) position, words can mean different things. The best way to have a conversation is to agree upon the meanings of terms. Can we really do this with religion? The anthropologist of religion Talal Asad, in his *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, argued that the Christian West measured non-Western societies according to the categories of thought produced in the West. As a result, non-Western societies could never meet Western standards. Religion, according to Asad, should be entirely understood in context. However, the West does not subject itself to such scrutiny—that is, it doesn’t understand its own context. Asad ponders the question: What might an anthropology of Western secularism look like? Answering such a question may lead to the practice of civility. Not unrelated, David Nirenberg in his magisterial study *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* reminds us that even the term “progress”—a word commonly associated with secularism—implies a Christian supersessionist worldview. Again, how can we, as a culture, society, or community, understand others if we don’t place the microscope back on ourselves? What if the very categories of thought that inspired academic disciplines such as history, philosophy, and anthropology, do the “work” of othering, the legacy of Christian anti-Judaism? How might answering these questions help us understand the nuances of other cultures, religions, and societies?
might answering these questions change the way we think about ourselves, our communities, and our society?

The famous Nazi sympathizer and influential philosopher Martin Heidegger argued that the technological revolution in the early twentieth century was a reasonable extension of metaphysics. Nazi Germany, of course, was an extreme example of this. If Heidegger was correct, then people are required to engage several disturbing truths: This dependence on metaphysics and the logical extension thereof presupposes the inevitability of human objectification, and the hopes and values of any two quarreling worldviews are sublimated into values dependent on technological outcomes. Someone needs to win. The call for public reason and values reverts to a battle zone in the marketplace of ideas. If you think that this point of view has gone out of style, how then would you explain the rise of Ayn Rand’s objectivism and political libertarianism in connection with the immense value people put into being obdurate, obstreperous, purposely ignorant, and flat out selfish? These are disturbing trends that cannot lend themselves to the genuine, democratic practice of civility. To be civil in this context means to be right.

Yet do we really have only one narrative informing our values and judgment that competes daily with others? Did we really choose or inherent the right worldview? Most of us recognize that our narratives are interwoven into those of others. How does this play a role in how we develop our political or theological points of view? Again, how many of you are ready to give up the most important experiences, ideas, and beliefs that make up your sense of self in order to be truly civil? With all this in mind, let’s turn to old friend.

II. Don’t Be an Idiot!

In his controversial work *The Antichrist (Der Antichrist, 1895)*, Friedrich Nietzsche chastised the religion of Christianity, but in the spirit of the life-of-Jesus theology prevalent in his time, he attempted to rescue Jesus from subsequent Christian theology, albeit in a different way. Life-of-Jesus theologian Joseph Ernest Renan (1823-1892) mainstreamed the view that Jesus was a hero, a genius, a man beyond his time. Nietzsche, in contrast, calls Jesus an idiot. Yes, you heard that correctly. *Jesus was an idiot.* At first glance, Nietzsche is not at all subtle. However, for us to understand the life
of Jesus, presumably we would need to know the language of Jesus’ time and place. Etymologically, the word “idiot” denoted an “ordinary person.” In Latin, an idiot is someone uneducated. However, in Greek (the language of the Gospels), an idiot is a person who is unskilled at a profession. An idiot in Athenian democracy was self-absorbed, even in some cases a narcissist. In a democracy, you are born an idiot. You are self-centered. You are interested only in your private affairs. You believe your private affairs to have universal consequences. To move beyond your idiocy, indeed, to become a citizen, you must cultivate an interest in activities in the public arena, that is, beyond your own, private affairs. Denying the basic truths of this world—the world independent of us—is also idiotic in a classical sense. Ideology is idiotic. So is theology. Idiocy is an illness. It demonstrates not only poor judgment, according to Nietzsche, but also is dishonorable. Jesus, in this sense, was an idiot.

But was he? Nietzsche’s Jesus, Jesus the idiot, denied the relevance of the material world—the world independent of us. Reality, according to Jesus, was distorted. Take, for instance, Jesus’ remark, “The kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21). True reality is governed by an inner world, a world where God prevails. Of course this line—“the Kingdom of God is Within You”—is also the celebrated title of Leo Tolstoy’s work (1894) exploring an anarchist Christian political theology. Looking eastward, some have argued that Jesus as an idiot is a direct commentary on Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel *The Idiot* (1869). Nonetheless, as a result, indeed, as a moral imperative, to be like Jesus is to resist the world. “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” Jesus famously remarked, “and unto God, the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22.21). I wonder if this position need not be a truce. Jesus, according to Nietzsche, resists Caesar’s world because it is not important. Jesus’ inner world—the kingdom of God—is real even within each fleeting moment. However, denying the importance of the world is also truly idiotic. Does Jesus really deny one world in order to inhabit another?

For Nietzsche, nineteenth-century Life-of-Jesus theologians focused too much on Jesus’ assumed radical break with ancient Israelite tradition. This is probably because of their anti-Semitic leanings. However, it would have been more useful, according to Nietzsche, to compare Jesus’ teachings to those of Hinduism and Buddhism. This inner world, “the kingdom of God”—as a denial of the real world—can only be realized as
redeemed by a new way of living, not by engaging a new way of believing, or of faith. Only what transpires in our inner world is true, indeed, real. It is only these experiences that can be eternalized or perfected. However, it is not a clear rejection of our outer world, Caesar’s world. Nor is necessarily a rejection of another’s inner world, the kingdom of God.

Nietzsche argued that Jesus, as the “Son of Man” in fact had no interest in actually redeeming anyone. He merely lived as a guide to living. His legacy is found precisely in this life. Scholars of the life of Jesus, for Nietzsche, should consider this guide. We would then read sacred passages quite differently. Take, for example, the famous scene in Luke (23:42-43): “Then [one of the criminals crucified with Jesus] said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.’ He replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’” Nietzsche understands Jesus’ reply as saying, “You are with me now only if you comport yourself in my divinity.” In other words, by not recognizing the trials and tribulations of the real world, that is, the world independent of yourself, your life can be a kingdom of God each moment, like Jesus’. Even the worst physical suffering cannot take away the light of an inner kingdom, a Paradise. Faith as a private affair? Suffering as illusory? Only a true idiot could entertain this! Suffering is inexorably related to empathy. Empathy is related to biology and to theology. Does Jesus really turn away from this physical, empirical world? How could Jesus really reject one world in favor of another?

The cynical “agree-to-disagree” truce that now marks much contemporary public discourse regarding religion—to believe what you want to believe—is an irresponsible form of idiocy. It is also a form of power. Jesus’ legacy may be found in precisely this point. If you’re going to be an idiot, at least be like Jesus, in a Nietzschean sense. That is to say, to take your faith seriously requires you to demand that others take their faith (or lack of it) seriously. To live in service to their own inner kingdom of God, individuals invite others to join them simply by listening to them and learning from them. Those people or communities less open to difference fear losing an element of their religious integrity or dignity by listening. This does not have to be the case. A true idiot shuts himself off from the world. He or she is unable to practice civility. Jesus, however, was not a true idiot. An idiot in the spirit of Jesus lives between the phenomenal world and his
or her own inner world. There is real value in entertaining threats to our theological certainty. Herein we will find the practice of civility when talking about religion.

1 http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/16/us/16stendahl.html?_r=0