

1996

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Recommended Citation

Smith, Phil D., "A Basis for Civility" (1996). *Truth's Bright Embrace: Essays and Poems in Honor of Arthur O. Roberts*. Paper 18.
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A Basis for Civility

PHILIP D. SMITH

Give attention, if you will, to the virtue of civility. In this essay I want to define civility, then give a bit of its history, continue by predicting something of its future, and conclude by explaining civility's true ground, at least as I understand it.

We are not here interested in politeness or courtesy, though those meanings of "civility" may be ancillary to our topic. We are thinking instead about the political realm, and we are aware that many voices have been raised to decry the mean-spirited and vicious nature of politics, both in attaining and using public office. Wise people warn us that democratic governance depends on a kind of self-control, by which the participants in the process guard it against internal meltdown. We ought to give careful attention to civility, for democracy may depend on it.

Readers may find much to which they object in this essay, but they will agree that it marks off an interesting topic for discussion. Suggested corrections, at any point, are welcome. The most important thing comes last, for I hope readers will approve of what I say about the ground of civility even if they disagree with my account of what it is, what its history has been, or what its future may be.

A Definition of Civility

Civility has to do with treating political opponents well.

We set the stage by first defining "politics." Politics is the art or science of making decisions for groups of people. Note that by this definition, many activities count as political. Besides the politics of various kinds of governments, this definition includes office politics, church politics, family politics,

and university politics. “Politics” has a negative connotation in many minds, but this need not be. Whenever groups of people need to make decisions, there will be political decision-making. Sometimes political decisions are made badly (unjustly, stupidly, or whatever), but sometimes they are made well. Some political systems tend to produce more bad decisions than others—but that is the stuff of political theory, not the topic of this essay.

With this broad definition of politics in mind, we can ask interesting questions about morality and politics. For instance, people often distinguish political allies from political enemies, and we treat them very differently. I am particularly interested in how we treat—more precisely, how we should treat—our political enemies.¹ The answer, I think, is that we should treat our political opponents well.

What does it mean to treat one’s political opponents well? For starters, here are some prohibitions. We should not lie about our political opponents; we should not attack their positions with “straw man” arguments, *ad hominem* arguments, or other fallacious arguments; we should not break our agreements with them; and we should not unnecessarily impute evil motives to them. Positively, we should negotiate in good faith with our political enemies; we should debate issues honestly with them; and we should respect them.

More could be added, but this gives some idea of what I mean by treating political opponents well. Provisionally, I define “civility” to be a virtue, that is, it is a *properly grounded character trait (or combination of traits) which moves individuals or groups to treat political opponents well*. Later, I will suggest some modification of this definition, but it gives us enough to go on for now.

Notice the qualification “properly grounded” in the definition. It is possible for someone to be motivated to treat his political opponents well for wrong reasons. Perhaps, like Aristotle’s ignorant soldier, he does not understand the cost of virtue; he blithely assumes that everything will turn out fine. Just as we would not say that a soldier who fails to comprehend danger is truly brave, we would not say that a politician who had no idea that treating his political opponents well might bring political defeat is truly civil. Or, like Aristotle’s professional soldier, someone might exhibit a merely instrumental pseudo-virtue. If we treat political opponents well because we calculate that such behavior is the best way to win, we are not truly civil, just calculating.

True civility is the trait or traits of character that move one to treat one’s political opponents well for the right reasons. Further on, I will suggest what I think those reasons should be. But first we should look at the reasons that have been traditionally given as grounds for civility.

1. I think there are also interesting issues surrounding the way we treat political allies, but those matters are not the topic of this paper.

A Modernist Virtue

In October, 1555, Hugh Latimer was executed during the reign of England's "Bloody" Mary. He was burned at the stake with a fellow protestant, Nicholas Ridley. As recorded in the martyrology, *Acts and Monuments*, by John Foxe, Latimer cried out when the fire was laid to the fuel: "Be of good comfort, Mr. Ridley, and play the man! We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust never shall be put out."²

Latimer's courage when faced with death, and his good fortune to have his death recorded in a popular martyrology, made him into a hero/saint of the English reformation. What generations of readers of protestant history didn't read, however, was that some years before his own execution, Latimer presided over a "jolly muster," as a traditional-minded friar, John Forest, was roasted alive over a fire made of a wooden statue of a saint hauled out of a pilgrimmage church.³

Latimer's life and death is only one, though fairly gruesome, reminder that Christians have not always treated their political enemies well. Medieval and Reformation histories are replete with imprisonments, tortures, executions, and treacheries. Undoubtedly, many motivations and circumstances lie behind such behaviors. People acted out of greed, fear, superstition, hatred—the whole catalogue of human sinfulness. But part of the reason for some of this incivility, particularly in a case like Latimer's, was philosophical.

All sides in reformation disputes assumed that there was such a thing as true doctrine. If someone rejected true doctrine, he earned God's judgment of eternal death, so if torture could bring about repentance, it was actually good for the offender. Further, the heretic was a public blasphemer who deserved death. Finally, innocent people might be corrupted if they listened to the heretic's ideas. Matters of truth, especially of religious truth, were regarded as having highest importance—literally infinite importance. These factors produced a logic of intolerance. Those with positions of influence or power, such as Queen Mary, or Latimer himself when he presided over Forest's death, felt they had a duty to do all they could to eliminate heresy.

We should remember all this, because the ideological cold war between Protestants and Catholics formed much of the background to the emergence of modern philosophy.⁴ Louis Dupré has argued recently that we

2. "A Tale of Two Martyrs" *Christian History* (Vol. XIV, No. 4), 18-19.

3. Martin, Dennis. "Catholic Counterpoint: What was it like to be on the losing side of England's Reformation?" *Christian History* (Vol. XIV, No. 4), 30.

4. I owe to George Marsden the likening of the Protestant/Catholic conflict of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the anti-Marxist/Marxist conflict of the twentieth. Both cold wars were protracted struggles, they were interrupted by "hot" wars, and they mixed nationalism with ideology. Cf. Marsden, George. *Religion and American Culture* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1990), 12-13.

should be wary of oversimplifying our accounts of the emergence of the modern worldview, and he is probably right; significant changes in European intellectual history going back to the thirteenth century are part of the story of the development of modernity.⁵ Nevertheless, there is also merit in the traditional identification of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the beginning of the modern era. Dupré describes the Enlightenment as a canonizing of options which had first been opened by the first phase of the passage to modernity.⁶ One of those options, which the Enlightenment canonized as a settled principle, was a turn from authority to rationality as ground for knowledge.

During the Catholic/Protestant cold war, both sides appealed to authority—of scripture or of church—to certify truth. Early modern philosophers from Descartes and Leibniz to Hume and Kant appealed rather to reason. Many saw this not only as intellectually better, since appeal to authority was akin to superstition while appeal to reason was akin to science, but also practically better, since religious appeals to authority played so easily into the hand of warmakers. It was the Europe of 1648 and after, tired out by a hundred years of religious wars, that accepted a new worldview. To be sure, the cold war continued, but it played a gradually decreasing role in international politics, and to an ever-increasing degree Europe's intellectuals looked to reason rather than authority.⁷

It is hard to generalize about such things, but we probably owe the emergence of the virtue of civility to Enlightenment modernism. With philosophers like Hume, and especially Kant, the modern worldview changed the way Europeans thought about political enemies. If reasonable people can differ, and if a person's dignity is founded on his or her reason, then even people who disagree with each other ought to be able to respect and tolerate each other. It is not a remarkable coincidence that while Kant was explaining that the categorical imperative, which was the product of reason alone, required that we treat all people as ends and not merely means, Thomas Jefferson and other American reformers were enshrining religious freedom and toleration as fundamental principles of government. It was a fundamental assumption of the Enlightenment, which Kant only made

5. See Dupré, Louis. *Passage to Modernity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993). To oversimplify, Dupré's thesis is that the Enlightenment, which is usually thought of as the beginning of the modern era, was the second of two important revolutions in thought that transformed the Medieval world into the modern world. His book charts the first, largely thirteenth century, revolution.

6. Dupré, 253.

7. It's easy to overstate and oversimplify. Medieval philosophers and theologians did not denigrate reason. But, like Aquinas, they sought to bring their theorizing under the authority of church, creed, and scripture. I take it that one mark of a modern philosopher is that he or she will not submit the products of philosophical investigation to external authority.

more explicit than most of his contemporaries, that Reason was the same for all people. Universal rationality was the modernist basis for civility.

Postmodern Prospects for Civility

We live, as the culture watchers constantly din into our ears, in a post-modern world. If Dupré is right, in one sense this is simply not true. Our culture is still working out the implications of the breakup of the ancient and medieval worldviews; in that sense we are still moderns. What the culture watchers have right is that we no longer accept some of the principles of the Enlightenment.

To illustrate: The modernist (whether of the fourteenth century, the eighteenth century or the twentieth century) believes that the *now* is a significantly new thing.⁸ All modernists believe that the contingencies of time produce *fundamental* reshapings of knowledge and reality. (Ancient and medieval worldviews denied that true knowledge or reality could undergo fundamental change.) Some modernists, Enlightenment modernists, believed that changes over time exhibited progress. Some contemporary modernists, who call themselves post-modernists because they define modernism by the Enlightenment, have come to disbelieve in progress. They worry: If the human race is not progressing morally, is it really good that we are gaining more technological power? So, while all modernists (in Dupré's sense) believe that time has produced basic change, some of them have given up thinking that change is progress.

Something significant happens when our contemporaries reject principles of the Enlightenment, even if "post-modernism" may be an inappropriate description of that rejection. Now, one of the most widely proclaimed post-modernist (or anti-Enlightenment) assumptions is the rejection of universal rationality. The standards of reason, especially the standards of practical reason, which Enlightenment philosophers like Kant assumed to be universal, are labeled partial and parochial by post-modernists. Some people, who accept certain assumptions about individualism, objectivism, and self-interested rationality—that is, people with Enlightenment worldviews—will approach problems of practical reason in ways that Kant or Hume or Hobbes would recognize as rational. But other people do not think that way. So "rationality" means different things to different peoples, say the post-modernists.

This post-modern rejection of universal reason is surely right. Alasdair MacIntyre, in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, persuades me that even in the West we have several different traditions of practical reason, competing for our allegiance.⁹ Autonomous reason, a capitalized "Reason" that stands

8. Cf. Dupré, 145.

alone independent of historically conditioned reasoners, does not exist unless in the mind of God.

So the Enlightenment assumption of universal rationality is undermined. Post-modernists find they no longer believe in it. What happens to civility in these conditions?

For an Enlightenment modernist, a political opponent can be assumed to be a reasonable person. The political opponent can be appealed to on grounds of good evidence or clear reasoning. The political opponent, a reasonable person, is worthy of respect, even if disagreements persist between competing parties. The implications of Kant's categorical imperative are quite clear: We can work to defeat our political opponents—in a sense, they are obstacles to be overcome, means to our ends—but we may never treat political opponents as *merely* obstacles. We must always treat them as ends in themselves. Even further, since our worst political opponents are rational seekers of truth, they are actually our allies. Through vigorous debate, seekers pursue the truth together.

But post-modernists need not believe this. The post-modernist does not assume that all people are "reasonable." Rather, some people are reasonable in one way, while others are reasonable in another way, and still others are reasonable in still other ways—and the various kinds of rationality may be incommensurable and irreconcilable. There is no way to appeal to all political enemies on the grounds of evidence (they may not see the evidence as relevant) or good reasons (they may reject the assumptions behind the reasons). Therefore there is no compelling need to treat political enemies with respect. After all, some political enemies are most easily dealt with summarily: we see them just as obstacles. There is no independent standard of rationality which would require us to treat them as more than obstacles.

Some post-modernists, like Richard Rorty, still urge civility and other liberal values. But he does not urge this on the basis of some truth about the universe or ourselves. Rather, this is just the way liberal people happen to feel.¹⁰

I suspect—this is where I pull out my crystal ball and predict—that we shall soon hear from post-modern voices that do not urge civility. Like Nietzsche, they will call us to a bracing acceptance of our "thisness": "I am this, and I want that. My political enemy is that which stands between me and the fulfillment of my desire." From a subjectivist point of view, the enemy is and can be nothing more than an obstacle. And there is no objective point of view (objectivity is another Enlightenment concept deconstructed by post-modernists) to correct the subjectivist's point of view.

9. MacIntyre, Alasdair. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), Cf. pp. 1-11 for an initial statement of his position, which is argued at length throughout the book.

In short, I predict dark days ahead for civility. As we know it, civility is largely the gift of Enlightenment assumptions that we no longer make. Those who feel like it, or whose historically contingent way of exercising practical reason recommends it, will continue to treat their political opponents well and train themselves in the virtues that motivate such behavior. But as people come to recognize their feelings in this regard and the ways they have learned to think about this matter as pure historical accidents, they will have little defense against the temptations of incivility.

Solid Ground for Civility

All of this suggests an historical irony, given the history of civility outlined above. Though Christians of the modern era have learned to regard civility as a virtue through the influence of Enlightenment modernism, it is Christian doctrine, not modernist philosophy, which provides a sufficient foundation for civility.

This may seem surprising. After all, according to my brief account of reformation disputes, it was the Christian assumption that true doctrine had great importance that lay behind a logic of intolerance. "Since we have the truth, the heretic must be made to see that it is the truth." Right?

Wrong. The assumption that truth exists is not the problem. We need further assumptions to create the logic of intolerance. First, we need to think that we have the right formulation of the truth. Second, we assume that we gain our right formulation of the truth independently of the thought of those who disagree with us. Third, we believe that the truth is itself compatible with intolerance. A "fallibilist" rejects the first two of these assumptions; that is, a fallibilist will always keep alive in her mind the possibility that she is wrong, and she will believe that opposing views are useful in the pursuit of truth. Some philosophers have suggested that fallibilism is, or is part of, the cure for intolerance.¹¹ It may be that we should be fallibilists about our political positions and many other beliefs we hold. However, rather than dipping into that debate, I want to take issue with the third assumption just mentioned.

10. Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), Cf. p. 189: "...a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance." And pp. 197-98: "There is no *neutral*, noncircular way to defend the liberal's claim that cruelty is the worst thing we do, any more than there is a neutral way to back up Nietzsche's assertion that this claim expressed a resentful, slavish attitude. ... We cannot look back behind the processes of socialization which convinced us twentieth-century liberals of the validity of this claim and appeal to something which is more "real" or less ephemeral than the historical contingencies which brought those processes into existence. *We* have to start from where *we* are..."

Most parties to reformation disputes, and many political groups in the generations since, have assumed that truth is compatible with the forcible suppression of error. They have thought that truth is so important that error must be suppressed. But what if the content of truth was itself incompatible with incivility? If that were the case, it would be possible for a person to hold a truth with absolute certainty, and believe that opposing views are useless in the pursuit of truth, and still have good reasons for being civil.¹²

My belief is that truth is incompatible with intolerance or incivility. The proper grounds for civility are not to be found in fallibilism, but in the truth itself. It is not because I am uncertain of the doctrines I espouse that I listen attentively to those who disagree with me, but because of the content of those doctrines.

What truth or doctrines could I be referring to? Just this, the heart of Christianity: Jesus Christ died for sinners, that is, for his enemies.

Christian dogma teaches us that we, who made ourselves God's enemies, are the objects of his love. His love overcame that enmity and made us his friends, through the cross. Jesus' words, expressed on the cross about the particular soldiers who crucified him, express his attitude toward all his enemies: "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing" (Luke 23:34).

Christian truth requires civility in at least three ways. 1. Because God, in Christ, loved his enemies, Christians have no option but to try to love their enemies. Christ is our example. 2. Further, Jesus explicitly told his followers to love their enemies. Christ is our lawgiver. 3. Further still, as the light of the world, Jesus is the light in every person. We should look for the light of Christ in everyone, including our enemies. Christ is our *logos* of civility.¹³

11. Cf. Quinn, Philip L. "Political Liberalisms and Their Exclusions of the Religious," the Presidential Address delivered at the 93rd Annual Central Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 69, No. 2, 47. Quinn agrees with other writers who think that fallibilism ought not to be a requirement of discourse in the public square, since such a requirement would exclude certain religious traditions, which explicitly reject fallibilism, from joining in political debate.

In this regard it is helpful to remember the form of fallibilism of the dissenting puritans in the Westminster Assembly, who helped move English society from the religious wars of the sixteenth century to the *Act of Toleration* in 1689. Although the Dissenters did not carry the day during the Westminster Assembly, they argued that differences of opinion among Christians were due to the weakness of human apprehension of the truth, and that differences of opinion could lead to fuller apprehension of the truth. Thus, the Dissenters' position anticipated that of fallibilists. Cf. Koivisto, Rex. *One Lord, One Faith: A Theology for Cross-Denominational Renewal* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books/SP Publications, Inc. 1993), 98-101.

12. These comments should not be construed as meaning that I reject fallibilism. The point is that one need not be a fallibilist to have good grounds for civility. We don't have to convert people to fallibilism to convert them to civility.

Part of the irony, of course, is that though Christians have always had perfectly good reasons to treat their enemies well, they failed to do so and had to learn civility from Enlightenment philosophers. This was not just because Christians failed to live up to their understanding of the gospel, but because they partly failed to understand the gospel. Part of the Quaker mission in history, it seems to me, has been to help correct that misunderstanding. Quakers, who understand that the light of Christ is present in others, even enemies, can help other Christians to see that civility is a virtue.

If my earlier prediction comes true, we will hear Nietzsche-like post-modern voices that forthrightly reject civility. I hope my prediction does not come true; it would be better to live in a culture that honors civility than to be an accurate forecaster. But even if some around us find that they no longer have reasons to be civil, Christians should not be deterred from training themselves in this virtue. We want to be like Christ; we want to obey his commands; and we want to recognize Christ in all people, including our political opponents.

In conclusion, a small correction to my definition of civility should be made. I defined civility as a character trait (or traits) which moves one to treat enemies well. As it stands, that definition is act oriented, as if right actions were of first importance and virtues consisted in propensities to carry out right actions. I don't think that is the way we should understand the relationship of actions and virtues, but it is hard to express the intertwined nature of doing and being without extending this essay far too much. Perhaps it is enough to say that Christians ought to strive to *be* civil as much as they ought to act civilly.¹⁴

13. Readers might compare this idea—that Christ is the *logos* of our civility—to Arthur Roberts' paper, "Good and Evil in a World Threatened by Nuclear Omnicide: A Proposed Epistemological Paradigm." The paradigm he proposes posits rational, sensory, and intuitive modes of apprehending truth, modes which different individuals combine in varying ways. Such a model reinforces for us the need to listen to others. Other people, even political opponents, can teach us something of the *logos*, the center toward which we must move if we want to progress morally, intellectually or esthetically.

14. Thanks to Paul Anderson for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.