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Review of *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration* by Teresa M. Bejan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017)

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Abstract

**Review of *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration* by Teresa M. Bejan
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Just before the November 2016 election I was asked to facilitate a workshop on civility for a regional agency serving senior citizens. In that pre-Thanksgiving season of campaign strife, many clients had expressed worry about communicating with relatives during the upcoming holidays. To assure workshop participants that calls for more civility weren't unique to them, I took a sampling of books, including George Washington's *Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*¹ and *Creating and Sustaining Civility in Nursing Education*² by Cynthia Clark. The first title provoked some amusement as workshop participants read details of etiquette hand-copied by America's first President from an earlier manual. The second title caused some unease, as we discussed the implications for patient care of incivility in nursing classes. What *is* civility, we asked, and where did the idea originate?

The book I would select for an advanced workshop to re-examine that question was published just after the 2016 election. Teresa Bejan's provocative title *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration* strings together four essential keywords to describe the problem. "Mere" seems to understate the enormous challenge of framing two adverse conditions – disagreement and limits –between two treasured, if not well-defined values – tolerance and civility. Bejan's inquiry is intellectual and provocative. She offers readers a way to evaluate many treatments of these four concepts by comparing three writers living in a period perhaps even more uncivil and intolerant than our own. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), Roger Williams (1603-1683), and John Locke (1632-1704) each formulated a response to the question of how people who disagree should interact, and she describes their solutions as "civil silence," "mere civility," and "civil charity," respectively. We learn early in her book that she promotes Roger Williams' "mere" civility for our present-day attempts to sustain conversation across difference, and we discover that *mere civility* is not "civility-lite" but a requirement for vigorous, challenging discussions.

Bejan makes a good case for comparing religious intolerance in England and the American colonies in the late 17th. century to the ideological polarization of today. Just as our current social media intensify the spread and impact of hate speech, the polemical pamphlets and letters circulated by competing religious factions during the Reformation were considered threats to public peace. She compares some of

¹ Washington, G. (1926). *Rules of civility & decent behaviour in company and conversation: A book of etiquette* (C. Moore Ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

² Clark, C. (2017). *Creating and Sustaining Civility in Nursing Education* (Second ed.). Indianapolis, IN: Sigma Theta Tau International.

today's campus speech code controversies to the civil silence orders attempted in England and Europe during that time, in response to the inflammatory intensity of religious insults. One famous exchange she alludes to between Martin Luther and Pope Leo X is a useful illustration. Martin Luther: "Now, if a pontiff rules while Christ is absent and does not dwell in his heart, what else is he but a vicar of Christ? . . . What indeed is such a vicar but antichrist and an idol?"³ Pope Leo X: "this same Martin and the rest are excommunicate, accursed, condemned, heretics, hardened, interdicted, deprived of possessions and incapable of owning them. . ."⁴. Today's readers might compare the history of violence following that confrontation with the repercussions to the 2005 cartoons published in the Danish *Jyllands Posten* depicting the Prophet Mohammed.

Bejan identifies other writers who attempted to "keep the peace" among competing religious *denominations* (even this term is literally a "put-down" label of one group by another, eventually adopted by the target sects, e.g., *Quakers*, *Protestants*, *Anabaptists*). She explains their range of approaches as reflecting shifting assumptions about maintaining the "bonds of society" (*vinculum societatis*) based on tenets of Christianity. *Tolerance* of difference today smacks of disrespect, perhaps because the medieval application of that concept meant "permission without approval" and might be applied to Jewish or Muslim believers but not to Christians. Similarly, *indulgence*, or official exemption of specific dissenters from legal penalties, might be applied in the English Reformation to specific Protestant sects, but not to Catholics. *Comprehension*, or the attempt to come to a mutual understanding (think today of "Common Ground" discussions) was a concept aspired to in *Colloquia*, a series of invitational dialogues among Catholic and Protestant leaders on the *Fundamenta*, or fundamental beliefs that they hoped they could all agree on. Bejan writes that these passing approaches did not stop the violent persecution that persisted through the Reformation until "battle fatigue or enlightenment" brought about a recognition that differences would persist.

The key features of Hobbes, Williams, and Locke that Bejan analyses are their responses to difference in relationship to discord. These weren't abstract concepts, as each author was forced by political and religious disputes to go into exile at some point in his life. Difference, or disagreement with prevailing authorities on matters of religious affiliation or practice, had dangerous consequences. Their ideas about

³ Luther, M. (1520) Concerning Christian Liberty With Letter of Martin Luther to Pope Leo X <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1911/1911-h/1911-h.htm>

⁴ Pope Leo X (1531) Decret Romanum Pontificem Papal Bull of Excommunication of Martin Luther and His Followers <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Leo10/110decet.htm>

how society at large might minimize violent discord due to difference are compared in the context of England's Civil War and the growing religious diversity among its American colonies.

For Thomas Hobbes, "civil silence" on matters of religious difference was essential in order to suppress the violence he believed would inevitably result from a free exchange of views. Bejan points out that "civility" is not the subject of Hobbes' writing, though "bestial incivility" occupies much of his attention. His description of sectarian disputes explained that if "individuals follow their reason in worshipping God, [they] are so different from each other that they . . . judge each other's worship unseemly and impious; and [do] not accept that the others [are] worshipping God at all" (p. 91). Because of this judgement, "the disputes which arise must inevitably be innumerable and insoluble, and that would be the occasion . . . first of resentment and then of quarrelling and war; and all society and peace would perish" (p. 95). Limiting public disagreement itself was his solution, to be enforced by a sovereign with all of the authority of the church itself. Under sovereign enforcement, what were the requirements of the populace? *Discretion*, and *complaisance*. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes described the former as the ability to judge when to speak or not, and *complaisance* was the stipulation that every man should "strive to accommodate himself to the rest" (p. 99).

Roger Williams represented just the type of non-conforming evangelist that Hobbes feared most when it came to public discord. Williams' mission to convince others to renounce their "mistaken" beliefs offended not only members of the Anglican, but other Protestant churches on both sides of the Atlantic, to the extent that he never succeeded in leading any congregation. Yet his tolerance, or recognition without approval, of the prevalence of multiple religious followings, is linked to his innovative separation of the "civil" from the "spiritual", as a solution for keeping the peace. "Notwithstanding several *Religions* in one Nation, in one *Shire*, yea in one *Family*, if men be . . . but truly *Civil*, and walk by the rules of *Humanity* and *Civility*; Families, Townes, Cities, and Commonweals (in the midst of *Spiritual* Differences) may flourish" (p. 57). Exactly opposite to Hobbes, who assigned religious enforcement authority to the sovereign ruler, Williams considered spiritual authority "a higher and farre different nature from the Peace of the place or people, being merely and essentially *civill* and *humane*" (p.60). While he recognized the need for "common aire to breath in, and a civill cohabitation upon the same common earth", he also wrote "all the Nations of the Earth... are "alike uncleane. . . until it pleaseth the Father of mercies to call some out to the Knowledge and Grace of his Sonne, making them to see their filthiness and strangenesse." (p.

61). From a practical standpoint, the “mere” civility of Williams suggests that separation of a civil sector for governing public behavior from the religious sphere offered a virtual space for evangelizing. If that communication created offense, then listeners simply needed to “toughen up.” Williams chided, “If the Jews . . . blasphemously call our Christ a Deceiver. . . Must we raile, revile, &c., and cry out *Blasphemers, Hereticks?* Must we run to the Cutlers shop, the Armoires, and Magazines of the Cities of Nations. . .?” (p. 78). The greater offense, to Williams, was official religious persecution, “that wrong and preposterous way of suppressing preventing, and extinguishing such doctrines or practices” (p. 77). Accordingly, his support for “permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or Antichrisian consciences and worships” was paired with the stipulation “that they are only to be fought against with that sword which is only, in soul matters, able to conquer: to wit, the sword of God’s Spirit, the word of God” (p. 78).

For John Locke, taking religious freedom to proselytize without due consideration of other’s feelings could be counter-productive. His concept of civility as the “disposition of the mind not to offend others” (p. 133) linked the Christian idea of charity to a “duty of tolerance” as a means of moderating sectarian debates. He wrote that “Any one may employ as many Exhortations and Arguments as he pleases, toward the promoting of another man’s Salvation” but that “nothing is to be done imperiously” but with “such a Carriage” that would “proceed from Charity, Love, or Good-will” (p. 131). He set a high standard, that it was an “indispensable duty for all Christians to maintain love and charity in the diversity of contrary opinions” (p. 138). “Men will always differ on religious questions and rival parties will continue to quarrel and wage war on each other unless the establishment of equal liberty for all provides a bond of mutual charity by which all may be brought together into one body.” (p. 139). This encapsulates what Bejan describes as the “hope that civility might . . . itself replace the traditional *vinculum* of true religion. . . by uniting those who were of different religious “persuasions” through the practice of disagreement itself” (p. 49).

Bejan points to modern-day “civilitarians” who promote Locke’s work with an emphasis on mutual toleration. In her conclusion, she asserts that as political theorists they are setting up an aspirational theory of civility, one that avoids the “dynamic of repression and exclusion” that has historically challenged our understanding of the term. She is particularly concerned about present-day problems with liberal democracies’ toleration of verbal persecution, and assumptions in the United States that “freedoms of religions and of speech, as well as association, are equally sacred and entirely consistent” (p. 168). Bejan states

that our society has already made its commitment to “the twofold toleration of diversity and disagreement”, but that Roger Williams acknowledged the tension between these two could “only be managed, never solved” (p. 158). In managing to keep the conversation going, as any evangelist would, she recognizes a more realistic goal than the ideals of sincere mutual respect or issue resolution. This goal resonates with many of us who facilitate public conversations on divisive issues. Incivility, in the case of the nursing education book we discussed in our workshop, can actually be employed to shut down conversation. During a time of heightened awareness of incivility in many public and private spheres, a review of three writers from history through Bejan’s well-analyzed and annotated survey may help us re-configure the concepts for ourselves.