Teresa M. Bejan, *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration*, Harvard University Press, 2017, 288 pp., $45.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9780674545496.

Civility is about how people talk to each other. Like debates about free speech, it is concerned with our verbal expressions. However, unlike debates about free speech, it is primarily about the horizontal relations between ordinary people, rather than the vertical relations between citizen and state. Civility is about the norms, standards and expectations for how we interact. This is a quite broad field spanning from everyday verbal gestures of politeness, over public speech in diverse contexts, to written expressions of opinions in printed media and—in particular these days—on the Internet.

The very category of civility marks these sorts of behavior as possible objects of norms and expectations. As such, the concept of civility at the general level points to a social space distinct from other possible objects of political assessment such as institutions, laws, and structural phenomena like distributions of income or political power. When one uses the category of civility, one thereby points out that this sphere of social life is a possible object of political discussion in its own right.

Doing this is not tantamount to endorsement of any particular view about what the appropriate norms of civility are.[1] There is a distinction between using the general category of civility, which raises the question about what the appropriate standards of assessment are, and advocating specific norms of civility. One can accept the category of civility as important and still reject particular proposed norms of civility, e.g. the view that people should avoid offending each other's religious sensibilities.

The reason for focusing on the category of civility is that it actually covers a very big and extremely important part of social life. Even though institutions and laws are surely important, most of our social world is not directly regulated by laws or formal institutions. If society is to work, the people constituting it have to be able to interact with each other.

This is why—even though civility is initially about social rather than legal matters—states often try to enforce certain norms of civility. While the category of civility itself is about social interactions, the importance of making sure that these do not break down can lead political actors to try to regulate them by legal sanctions. This is tantamount to using the law to punish deviations from certain norms of civility. Laws against hate-speech are the prime example of this.

---

[1] Sune Lægaard, "The Case of the Danish Cartoons Controversy: The Paradox of Civility," in *Islam and Public Controversy in Europe*, Nilüfer Göle, ed. (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2013), 123-136, 127.

As should already be evident, civility is a very topical issue. We have seen many debates about civility recently—from debates about trigger warnings, safe spaces, and speech codes on university campuses, over debates about hate-speech legislation, to more general concerns about a supposed "crisis of civility."[2] While many of these debates have concerned ethnic and culturally defined differences, religion has increasingly become the focus of debates about civility.

Especially in Europe, where many countries still have laws against blasphemy and hate-speech, and where immigration of particularly Muslims have changed the religious landscape quickly over the last generations, Islam is often a focus point for debates about civility. The United States differs at the level of legislation, where the First Amendment makes the US stand apart from almost all other liberal democracies as far as regulation of free speech goes. Nevertheless, as recent debates testify, including the declarations and executive orders of President Trump, Muslims and Islam are now central to the American debate as well.

The Rushdie Affair was the first major example of this. The controversy over the Danish Cartoons of Muhammad took this development to new heights, sparked by the possibility for spreading offensive expressions and mobilization against these through the Internet. Civility is now both a transnational and to a large extent virtual issue, with potential for setting off major social and political crises.[3] Developments of social media have only accelerated this trend further and at the same time opened up spaces for even grosser forms of incivility than more traditional edited media.

From this brief sketch, it would seem that civility debates are characteristic of our new social reality defined by transnationalism, multiculturalism, and developments of new communication technologies. The developments raising issues of civility seem very specific to our twenty-first century world. The political framework within which they must be addressed also seems to be distinctively modern conceptions of liberal democracy, albeit challenged by globalization, terrorism, and populism.

Teresa Bejan's book *Mere Civility* therefore initially seems a bit out of place as a contribution to the political theory of current debates about civility. Although Bejan's introductory stage setting maps out current debates about civility and her concluding discussion returns to the different positions in contemporary political theory regarding these issues, such as Rawlsian public reason[4] and contributions to debates about hate-speech legislation,[5] the bulk of the book consists of four chapters on civility in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. This is mainly a historical work presenting and explaining how the problem of civility was understood in the two centuries following the Reformation. Bejan focuses on three thinkers who struggled with this issue, namely the two well-known philosophers Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and John Locke (1632-1704), and the (at least as a political thinker) less well-known founder of the colony Rhode Island, Roger Williams (c. 1603-1683). Most of the book consists in patient, detailed, and sophisticated excavation of civility as a theme in the writings of these three thinkers.

As unlikely a learned and exegetical discussion of seventeenth century writings might seem as a contribution to the current debate about how contemporary liberal democracies

---

[2] See, for example, Stephen L. Carter, *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1998) and Austin Sarat, ed., *Civility, Legality, and Justice in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[3] On civility in a transnational context, see Sune Lægaard, "Normative Significance of Transnationalism? The Case of the Danish Cartoons Controversy," *Ethics & Global Politics*, Vol. 3, Issue 2 (2010), 101-122.

[4] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

[5] E.g. Jeremy Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2012).

should handle, e.g., Islamophobic and populist hate-speech on social media, Bejan's book surprises positively. Not only does she provide both a theoretically rich as well as historically contextualized examination of fundamental political problems and ideas, she also succeeds in showing that our current predicament is actually in many ways similar to the one Europe and New England faced in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

It is an old story that the Reformation was to a large extent propelled by the advent of the new book printing technology, which permitted ideas to be spread in the vernacular much quicker and to many more people than before. Bejan adds to this old story illuminating and even entertaining details of the kind of religious debates that played out in the new printed medium. By selecting exemplary cases such as the debate between Erasmus of Rotterdam and Martin Luther, it becomes surprisingly clear how the kind of dynamics that we now worry about running amok in social media were already present in the new printed media in the sixteenth century. As soon as people can communicate their opinions to a potentially unlimited audience and learn about the differences between themselves and others, the gates open for countless forms of not only disagreement, but contempt, vilification, scorn, and offense. Civility was clearly just as much a pressing issue then as it is now, and for much the same kinds of reasons.

Bejan proceeds to diagnose at a much more fundamental level why civility became such an important issue for political thinkers of early modernity. This is not merely a matter of the disturbances that incivilities uttered in books and pamphlets gave rise to; it is more fundamentally a matter of the basic categories, which people used to think about society. The Reformation marked a rupture within Christianity. At the superficial level, this was a political and institutional rupture, as societies pated with the Catholic Church and princes took control of newly created national churches. This in turn led to civil unrest and religious wars.

However, a perhaps even more fundamental rupture occurred at the level of ideas. Until the Reformation, the assumption had been that all Christians were united in the social and spiritual harmony of *concordia*. While peace in the sense of an absence of violence and war was of course important, the most important thing was that all Christians were supposed to be members of the Church in a spiritual sense, as parts of the *Corpus Christianum* (28). *Concordia* was established and signified by the shared sacrament of communion. Therefore, the most important damage done by the Reformation, in the perspective of many sixteenth century thinkers, was not the institutional split and the resulting unrest, but the breakup of this unity and the spiritual *concordia*.

Again, such theological ideas might seem of only historical interest. But Bejan succeeds in showing their importance and relevance, not only for understanding the debates about civility that played out in seventeenth century political theory, but also for the fundamental political categories established by the thinkers participating in these debates. Civility was not merely a matter of securing non-violent interactions, but was debated against the sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit standard of *concordia*. This provided a background ideal of society that post-Reformation thinkers either had to struggle to reconceive society without, or kept on assuming even if they stopped using the term. The categories of modern liberal political theory emerged out of this engagement, although often in forms whose religious roots we have now forgotten.

The hero of the book is clearly Roger Williams who came closest to rejecting the standard of *concordia*. Bejan notes that others, such as Martha Nussbaum,[6] have tried to raise Williams up as a father of American toleration. However, whereas Nussbaum interprets Williams as concerned with equal respect, Bejan shows him to be—in a sense—about the exact opposite. Williams was far from respectful towards people whom he disagreed with, which was almost everybody. As an evangelical, he believed it to be his duty to engage with others and convey to them the depth of their errors. Nevertheless, he insisted that everybody could voice their beliefs, however erroneous, and even when his opponents, such as the Quakers, were uncivil in disturbing the exchange of views, he tolerated it. Bejan accordingly labels him both a "fanatic evangelical" (55) and an "intolerant tolerationist" (54). The resulting "mere civility" might also be called uncivil civility, because it dispenses with the hope for any kind of *concordia* that could smoothen disagreements and more or less only rules out violence. Bejan at several places suggests that "mere civility" is not this minimal, but it is hard to see what else it involves than a requirement of non-violence and an expectation of engaging with differences.

Hobbes, on the other hand, thought disagreement to be itself so provocative that "civil disagreement" was a contradiction in terms (90). Peace according to Hobbes requires what Bejan calls "difference without disagreement" and a corresponding norm of civility as "civic silence" (86). People can hold whatever beliefs they like, as long as they keep quiet with them. Whereas Williams believed that people could not and should not keep their inner beliefs to themselves, Hobbes believed that inner beliefs had to conform to the sovereign's rule over all outward expressions. Williams and Hobbes in fact agreed that one cannot distinguish between the manner and the substance of disagreement (92)—they just drew opposite conclusions from this belief.

Bejan nevertheless stresses that there is a sense in which Hobbes could be seen as a proponent of a form of toleration. All beliefs are tolerated conditional on external conformity with the dictates of the sovereign. In that sense, Hobbes dispenses with the ideal of inward *concordia* (101). He nevertheless can be seen as advocating a norm of civility requiring discretion as a social virtue of self-restraint and "compleasance" as a social virtue of conformity and agreeableness (98-99).

One of the most surprising elements of the book is the revisionary picture Bejan presents of Locke. In the standard liberal narrative, Locke was the first real proto-liberal. While he might not have been the first to argue for separation of church and state (Williams, as well as Spinoza and Bayle did that even more forcefully before him), he presented a strong principled argument for toleration and ultimately a neutral state, which was later put into practice in the US Constitution, especially in the First Amendment.

Bejan summarizes recent historical research done on the development of Locke's views and convincingly shows several ways in which this standard narrative is false. Locke started out arguing for an intolerant Hobbesian position (119) rather than for toleration based on natural rights. He was involved in the drafting of the *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* (1669), which, although it instituted a regime of religious toleration in the form of state recognition of churches, also included an article criminalizing religious insult (46). When he finally came round to the more recognizable tolerationist position in the *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), Bejan argues that this was due to a shift in his prudential calculus rather than a principled position (122). Rather than being against state censorship and intolerance

---

[6] Martha Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience: In Defense of America's Tradition of Religious Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

as a matter of principle, Bejan interprets Locke as being fundamentally concerned about civility; he merely came to think that attempts to impose and enforce it would be counterproductive. Bejan furthermore argues that the main motivation for Locke's toleration was Christian charity. So in the end, Locke surprisingly comes out as the thinker among the three that most tried to preserve the pre-Reformation ideal of *concordia*.

Bejan's book concentrates on laying bare the ways in which the three thinkers' views about civility are different from the standard story about the origins of liberalism and explaining the background for why they held these views. Bejan does not seek to set forth the systematic arguments for specific views about civility that they represent in detail or to enter into a critical discussion of them. The book is primarily exegetical and contextual, rather than systematic and critical. The strength of the book is nevertheless to show the current relevance and the complexity of the historical issues and views examined to current debates about civility and free speech.

Bejan returns to current debates and uses the insights gained from the examination of Williams, Hobbes, and Locke to diagnose many of the central aspects of current debates in political theory. Her presentation of important parts of debates about public reason and deliberative democracy as involving modern day Hobbesianism in the form of conversational restraints and modern day Lockeanism in the form of notions of civility as positive respect (145-149) is enlightening and surprising. But the positive systematic argument for preferring William's "mere civility" over these two alternative approaches is not set out or developed to any great length. The main contribution seems to be to point out the noted continuities, the inaccuracies of the standard liberal narrative, and the possibility for a third position.

Bejan finally suggests that the difference between modern day Hobbesians and Lockeans, on the one hand, and the alternative mere civility inspired by Williams, on the other, comes down to the degree of political realism informing the views: She stresses that civility is a solution to a practical, not a theoretical problem, as both Hobbesians and Lockeans tend to view it as (160-162). This is an important point, especially in current debates on civility, which tend to swing between very aspirational and more pragmatic approaches—often in ways amounting to double standards when high principles are invoked against some groups but not against others.

Sune Lægaard
Associate Professor of Philosophy
Department of Communication and Arts
Roskilde University, Denmark

6