

The Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence
Vol. II, Issue 2/2018
© The Authors 2018
Available online at <http://trivent-publishing.eu/>



BOOK REVIEW:

Bejan, Teresa M. *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration*.
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017. 288 pp.

By Robert K. Whitaker
Marquette University, USA
robert.whitaker@marquette.edu



The PJCv Journal is published by Trivent Publishing.

This is an Open Access article distributed in accordance with the Creative Commons Attribution Non Commercial (CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0) license, which permits others to copy or share the article, provided original work is properly cited and that this is not done for commercial purposes. Users may not remix, transform, or build upon the material and may not distribute the modified material (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

Bejan, Teresa M. *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration*.

Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017. 288 pp.

Teresa M. Bejan's *Mere Civility* is an engaging and strikingly relevant examination of three early modern thinkers' differing conceptions of the public virtue of civility, and the attendant notions of toleration and disagreement. Bejan offers a historically informed and provocatively argued glimpse into the minds of Roger Williams, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke, with a focus on clarifying and comparing their views on how to live together in society while disagreeing. The book is divided into seven sections: an introduction, a chapter which traces the historical development of the notion of toleration in the post-Reformation era owing to the need to govern the "persecution of the tongue" exemplified most prominently by Luther, a chapter each on the views of Williams, Hobbes, and Locke, a conclusion wherein Bejan argues in qualified support of Williams, and an epilogue on the uniquely American "fundamentalism" of unrestricted speech. Owing to space constraints, I unfortunately cannot discuss Bejan's insightful treatments of Hobbes and Locke, who represent views that Bejan labels "civil silence" (keeping one's thoughts to oneself and feigning uniformity for the sake of civil peace) and "civil charity" (the allowance of expressions of disagreement, provided the context of "mutual charity, trust, and good will"), respectively. Here I will outline her presentation of Williams, and end with a critical comment on her conclusion.

Bejan begins by noting, uncontroversially, that in our own time we face what commentators on all sides of political and ideological divides label a "crisis of civility." But our time is not unique. "Modern calls for civility," Bejan says, "reflect concerns about the corrosive effects of uncivil disagreement on social bonds and tender consciences very similar to those in the seventeenth century." (6). Bejan's aim is thus to provide a historical account of the early modern debates about civility that can be instructive for our own situation. A challenge that confronts us immediately in such a project is that civility itself is a vague and controversial concept, with some "civilitarians" seeing it as a panacea for all social ills, and other "civility skeptics" pointing out the inherently exclusionary nature of "civilizing discourse." Hence, Bejan asks: "Is it possible to 'civilize' disagreement without dissolving it altogether, whether through conformity or consensus?" (13).

Much of Bejan's discussion is centered around the early modernist attempt to find a suitable conceptual replacement for Christian *concordia* as the *vinculum societatis*, the tie holding society together despite disagreement over fundamentals. For Roger Williams, the charismatic and eccentric founder of Rhode Island, the solution was what Bejan labels "mere civility": the commitment to do what is necessary to make possible the continuation of disagreement, with the express purpose of proselytization. Against recent commentators who attempt "to recover a cosmopolitan, or even multicultural, Roger Williams," especially Martha Nussbaum, Bejan argues that Williams was an intolerant religious fanatic through and through, a man accustomed to separating himself from those he viewed as damned and who died worshipping "in a congregation of only two, him and his wife—and he may not have been entirely sure about her." (54). Nonetheless, Williams had the clarity of purpose and the right combination of life experiences to enable him to see that a sustainable notion of civility had to be grounded in a large measure of toleration of views that one despised, precisely so that conversion might remain possible, even if unlikely.

To this end, he advocated a radically inclusive standard of toleration which avoided censorship, exclusion on the basis of disagreement, or punishment for “contumely.” A *spiritual* community must be unified in thought and purpose, Williams admitted, but a *commonwealth* required no such exacting standards: here humans had the natural ability to get along in society together while disagreeing, as evidenced even by the pagans (60). “A hallmark of civility on Williams’s theory was thus an awareness of—and a conformability or accommodation to—the culturally specific norms of others.” (64). But importantly, this accommodation did not entail agreement, or even politeness. One could express their disagreement as openly and loudly as they liked, and indeed was encouraged to do so, so long as the disagreement was allowed to continue, a stance Bejan labels “evangelical toleration.”

Perhaps surprisingly, Bejan takes Williams’s side against Hobbes and Locke, arguing that a “Hobbesian approach that asks people to observe gag rules on contentious topics, or a Lockean request that people sincerely embrace their enemies as friends and brothers, either over- or underreacts to the very real differences between us.” (158). The problem with Lockean accounts in particular (which are far more popular today) is that they assume that people can express contempt for a view without thereby condemning its proponent. Williams (and Hobbes, for his part), on the other hand, realized that “our natural partiality and pride...mean that we invariably judge the rightness of others’ reasoning...with reference to our own,” and therefore that personal contempt is an “unavoidable result” of disagreement (159). But this does not obviously follow. One would like some further argument here for why contempt must be inevitable—other than the observation that it is typical—as well as consideration of a seemingly obvious but unconsidered Lockean rejoinder: that the basis of civil charity need not be any controversial ideal but rather reality itself. Far from regulating people’s inner lives, a Lockean approach could take a scientific account of human nature as its locus and define civility as respecting the humanity of others. Granted, this needs fleshing out, but it is not obviously susceptible to the charges Bejan levels against the Lockeanism in the book. Additionally, it is not clear how Bejan’s own Williams-inspired exhortation to a “thick-skinned determination to tolerate what we perceive as others’ incivility” avoids the very same problem for which she criticizes the Lockean view: setting standards of inclusion that are not universally shared or valued.

These issues notwithstanding, *Mere Civility* is a thoughtful and lively work, and is to be recommended for students of political philosophy and those interested in the issues of civility and disagreement.

Robert K. Whitaker
Marquette University, USA
robert.whitaker@marquette.edu