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Tolerance, Civility, and Cognitive Development

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Civility therefore is what in the first place should with great care be made habitual to children and young people.
—John Locke, Some Thoughts Concerning Education

Our system of secular government and state-sponsored education emphasizes neutrality and official tolerance of religious diversity. This approach grows out of the philosophical Enlightenment and centuries-old principles about the limits of political power. A neutral, secular approach to education has been reiterated by a number of court cases during the past century that build upon First Amendment principles. Despite a fairly long and well-established heritage, there is still tension between the principle of state neutrality and the non-neutral or absolutist principles of various religions.

This tension is unavoidable and cannot easily be eradicated. Philosophers—from Locke, Kant, and Mill to Rawls and Habermas—have been unsuccessful in resolving the tension that occurs when tolerant, secular regimes confront the reality of religious belief. The normal and unavoidable tension between religious idealism and secular pragmatism leads some to retreat to a pernicious form of relativism that results in a hands-off approach to religion in the public schools. This hands-off approach holds that since there is no way to resolve the problem and answer the question of religious truth, we should ignore the topic and avoid discussing religion. One result of this hands-off approach is religious ignorance and illiteracy (as described, for example, by Diane Moore), but ignorance, apathy, and avoidance are dangerous for civil society and liberal
democracy. Religious ignorance can lead to gross misunderstandings that
devolve toward violence. Furthermore, the strategy of avoidance leaves
citizens underprepared for the complex cognitive and emotional task of
dealing with religious diversity. The growing problem of incivility in the
public sphere can be understood as the result of an educational system
that avoids deep topics, prevents us from understanding our differences,
and leaves citizens without the philosophical skills to negotiate complex-
ity and diversity.

One solution is to have better religious studies education—an ap-
proach that has been defended by Diane Moore, Bruce Grelle, and the
other scholars involved in drafting the American Academy of Religion’s
Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K–12 Public Schools in the United
States. This is connected to a better and more philosophically informed
approach to education in general. We need students to understand the
dangers of relativism. We need them to understand that there are serious
non-relativistic arguments that ground the secular system (even though
some of these arguments are merely prudential or pragmatic).

We need students to understand the complexity of religion and the
pervasiveness of religious phenomena. And we need students to under-
stand the science of cognition, the epistemology of belief, the history of
religion, the political struggles that impact religious people, and the aes-
thetic values—in visual arts, poetry, and music—that arise from religious
contexts. Such a broad and comprehensive approach to religion should
be developed with careful attention to the global breadth of religious
phenomena.

One simple way of putting this is to say that students need a tradition-
al liberal arts education that includes discussions of religion. There are
substantial problems for implementing such a vision—in terms of the
ubiquity of standardized testing and other pedagogically questionable
pressures in education but the basics of a form of pedagogy that pro-
duces civility and understanding are well known—as part of the Enlight-
enment tradition that begins, at least, with Locke.

Locke provided a detailed philosophical defense of toleration—in his
“Letter Concerning Toleration.” But his reflections on education are also
important, since they provide a related account of how civility develops.
There are limitations in returning to Locke’s ideas: Locke defended slav-
ery in some cases, he thought that atheists were not to be tolerated, and
his discussion of education is focused on education in a class-based, hier-
archical society. But Locke’s basic ideas remain significant due to their
influence on other Enlightenment philosophers and on the Founding
Fathers of the United States.

Locke’s understanding of civility is explained in several paragraphs of
his book Some Thoughts Concerning Education. He notes that it is important
to find a middle path between bashful self-abasement and aggressive
boastfulness. The key, for Locke, is to develop “a disposition of the mind
not to offend others; and secondly, the most acceptable and agreeable
way of expressing that disposition.” Gracefulness in expression and de-
mehor is an expression of what Locke calls “internal civility of the
mind,” which is a talent that avoids “making any one uneasy in conversa-
tion.”

Locke identifies four characteristics that tend to produce incivility:
roughness, contempt, censoriousness, and captiousness. The last two are es-
pecially singled out by Locke as undermining civility. The censorious
individual focuses on the faults of others and usually resorts to some sort of
shaming or ridicule directed at the victim. Captiousness is the tendency
to be ill-natured and to find fault. We might use the term “cranky” to
describe this quality today. In summary, Locke maintains that civility is a
crucial skill (or virtue) for social living. He concludes, “He that knows
how to make those he converses with easy, without debasing himself to
low and servile flattery, has found the true art of living in the world, and
being both welcome and valued everywhere.” The key is to find a mid-
dle path between self-aggrandizing or cranky condemnation of others
and self-abasing deference to them. Another way of putting this is to say
that civility is the art of finding a middle path between righteous absolut-
ism and apathetic or indifferent relativism.

More recently, Ronald Arnett has explained how “civility offers mini-
mal common ground that permits diverse groups who share the goal of
continuing the public conversation and maintaining civil society to en-
gege life together.” The hope of civility is grounded in ideas that have
roots in Locke and have been more recently developed by Habermas and
Rawls. The hope is that there is a minimal common ground for public
reasoning.

Rawls explains, “The idea of citizenship imposes a moral, not a legal,
duty—the duty of civility—to be able to explain to one another on those
fundamental questions how the principles and policies they advocate
and vote for can be supported by the political values of public reason.
This duty also involves a willingness to listen to others and a fair-mind-
edsness in deciding when accommodations to their views should reason-
ably be made.”

Habermas concurs: “It is precisely the conditions for the successful
participation in the shared practice of democratic self-determination that
define the ethics of citizenship. For all their ongoing dissent on questions
of world views and religious doctrines, citizens are meant to respect one
another as free and equal members of their political community. And on
this basis of civic solidarity when it comes to contentious political issues
they are expected to look for a way to reach a rationally motivated agree-
ment—they owe one another good reasons.”

This hope for civility and civic solidarity is linked to the hope that a
secular liberal arts education can help us find this common ground. Un-
SECULAR EDUCATION, ENLIGHTENMENT NEUTRALITY, AND PRAGMATIC MODUS VIVENDI

The First Amendment states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." During the past century, the Supreme Court has interpreted the establishment and the free exercise clauses in ways that have led to the creation of a truly secular system of education. In cases such as Engel v. Vitale and Abington v. Schempp, the Court made it clear that religion cannot be taught in a devotional manner in schools and that school prayers and devotional scripture readings are out of bounds. Despite this sort of regulation, the Court never intended for religion to be avoided or ignored.

Indeed, the court explained in Abington v. Schempp (also noted in the American Academy of Religions' Guidelines), it might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be affected consistently with the First Amendment.

One important component of the Court's reasoning is the idea that religious freedom and freedom from state-sponsored religion are actually good for religion. Justice Black explained in the Engel v. Vitale decision that the Founding Fathers wanted to "put an end to governmental control of religion and of prayer." He went on to say that the First Amendment "was not written to destroy either" prayer or religion.

Rather, the amendment intended, as Black wrote in Engel v. Vitale, to quiet well-justified fears which nearly all of them felt arising out of an awareness that governments of the past had shackled men's tongues to make them speak only the religious thoughts that government wanted them to speak and to pray only to the God that government wanted them to pray to. It is neither sacrilegious nor antireligious to say that each separate government in this country should stay out of the business of writing or sanctioning official prayers and leave that purely religious function to the people themselves and to those the people choose to look to for religious guidance.

This idea, that secular freedom of religion is good for religion, is not accepted by everyone. Some will claim that the majority ought to be free to instill religious values in children through the school system. Such a claim flies in the face of the fact of religious diversity: in a diverse nation such as ours, there are significant minorities that will be inconvenienced and even harmed by an attempt to establish religion through the schools.

One recent proponent of explicitly Christian education is Douglas Wilson, a theologian and author from Idaho who gained prominence when he debated Christopher Hitchens about religion; Wilson also published a response to Sam Harris titled Letter from a Christian Citizen. Wilson argues for separate Christian schools because he believes that after the Court decisions mentioned above, our educational establishment lost its moral compass. Without the Christian focus, education collapses and the culture devolves into violence and chaos.

In his The Case for Classical Christian Education, Wilson writes,

The kids are taught that they evolved from some primordial goo and that their lives have no transcendent meaning. Everything is vanity, everything is worthless. Morality is what you, the student, want it to be. And then when some of the kids, natural inhibitions loosened by the drugs [he is talking about prescription drugs: Ritalin, Luvox, and Prozac], take this curricular lesson out to the logical practicum and start blowing fellow students away, bits of protoplasm every one of them, those in authority wonder where this behavior is coming from. The kids who turn violent are called "monsters" by the school system that made them what they are.

In his response to Sam Harris, Wilson claims that the secular system of education is simply not working. Addressing the secular educational establishment, Wilson writes,

You all have had nearly complete control of the education establishment for over a century and a half. You have the accrediting agencies, you have the government schools, and you have the vast majority of colleges and universities. You are the educational establishment. And yet your complaint here reminds me of the ignignant father who said, "I taught him everything I know and he's still stupid!" At what point should a committed secularist take responsibility for the state of education in America? Perhaps the problem is not in the students?

Wilson's vision is of a separate form of Christian education. However, some religious people continue to want to take back the public schools. This is often done by forms of "direct action" in the schools. One of the leading organizations in this direct action approach is the Alliance Defense Fund, which provides legal counsel for teachers, administrators, and parents who are trying to push the limits of First Amendment law regarding the public schools.

The Alliance Defense Fund website explains the issue as follows:

There is an intense battle for the mind and soul of children at publicly funded schools where the dominant secular culture is undermining the Christian teaching of parents like you. Students are under great pres-
sure to conform to the schools’ radical, anti-Christian views on issues such as abortion and homosexual behavior, which are imposed on them by secular textbooks, administrators, and teachers. . . . As a result of this anti-Christian indoctrination in school, countless students begin questioning their faith and ultimately turn away from the Church by the time they graduate from high school.

Teachers and citizens continue to push back by bringing religion into the schools. Consider the case of Bradley Johnson, a San Diego County math teacher. Mr. Johnson hung posters on his classroom wall that collected religiously oriented statements from American history. The posters included phrases such as “In God We Trust” and “God shed his grace on thee.” Johnson claimed that he intended this as a patriotic celebration of America’s heritage, but it seemed that Johnson was trying to find a way to bring his own religious standpoint into the math classroom.

The school district forced him to remove the posters, claiming that “because they were taken out of context and very large” these phrases “became a promotion of a particular viewpoint that might make students who didn’t share that viewpoint uncomfortable.” In September 2011, the Ninth Circuit Court ruled in support of the school district in Bradley Johnson v. Poway Unified School District. It found that Johnson’s display was not “neutral,” as required under the First Amendment. The court agreed that the school district was enforcing “neutrality” by removing Johnson’s posters.

The idea that the state and the schools should be neutral is an important one that is the result of long years of religious and political struggle. This struggle culminated in the Enlightenment with philosophical theories of toleration and free expression—as espoused by Locke, Kant, Mill, and others—and with political principles of toleration and free expression being written into law with the First Amendment.

One important argument in favor of toleration and official neutrality is a pragmatic one that has roots in Locke’s “Letter Concerning Toleration.” Locke argued that it was wrong to enforce religious belief because he thought that it would ultimately be ineffective. Efforts to enforce conformity result in violence, as centuries of religious war and the Inquisition in Europe demonstrate. Locke also thought that, psychologically speaking, force simply won’t work to produce sincere religious belief.

External conformity can be created by force, given that obedience can be created by violence or the threat of violence, as Hannah Arendt has noted, but the spiritual transformation of religion cannot be produced by violence or the threat of violence. I have described this in more detail as an epistemological argument in favor of toleration in Tolerance and the Ethical Life. It is grounded in some ideas found in Locke’s letter.

Locke says, “For the truth certainly would do well enough if she were left to shift for herself . . . . She is not taught by laws, nor has she any need of force to procure her entrance into the minds of men.” Locke goes on:

“Anyone may employ as many exhortations and arguments as he please. But force and compulsion are to be forborne.” This is so because Locke maintains that “every man has the supreme and absolute authority of judging for himself.” You can torture and coerce people into external conformity, but an inward transformation is required for religion, and this inward transformation cannot be created by force.

It is important to remember that Locke offers this idea as a Christian. Locke had published a defense of Christianity, The Reasonableness of Christianity, in which he hints at a theological basis for human rights. He argues that Christianity makes Christians free from the law in a way that was not true for the Jews, who were constrained to obey the rituals laid down by Moses.

Locke’s Protestant theology is central here, but Locke’s theistic idea of liberty has its limits. Consider, for example, Locke’s infamous claim that toleration should extend across Christian sects but atheists and Catholics cannot be tolerated. According to Locke, atheism “dissolves all” and leaves the atheist without morality or a moral ground upon which to challenge intolerance, and Catholics are more loyal to Rome than to any state in which they live.

Locke’s Protestant Christianity is focused on the inward transformation of faith that is not amenable to violence, and so Locke believes that toleration is grounded in Christian ethics. Locke states, “The toleration of those that differ from others in matters of religion is so agreeable to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to the genuine reason of mankind, that it seems monstrous for men to be so blind as not to perceive the necessity and advantage of it in so clear a light.”

Some people claim that Locke is wrong about his epistemological or psychological claim that violence is not effective in producing genuine belief. Jeremy Waldron, for example, argues that beliefs can, in rare and extreme circumstances, be changed by force, but Locke reminds us that force is generally not effective. Locke also tends to think that force is not the proper tool for developing belief, but the ethical point is not necessary for a less principled form of toleration. The pragmatic argument about what works in the realm of belief is enough to leave us with a fairly substantial defense of toleration.

One can see here how Lockean toleration fits with his notion of civility. If civility is the ability to find the middle path between censorious judgmentalism and self-abasing relativism, then toleration and civility are linked. When we tolerate others, we do judge them negatively, but we refrain from acting on the negative judgment. One reason to refrain from acting on the negative judgment is because we see that, pragmatically speaking, such negative actions often backfire and fail. Ridicule, contempt, and other negative attitudes tend to devolve toward violence, disrupting community, breaking down communication, and preventing dialogue.
There are more principled approaches to the issue of toleration and neutrality. The principled approach is typical of the American legal tradition. The idea that we have a basic right to freedom of religion states an absolute principle that cannot be violated. However, the problem for the principled/absolutist approach is that it can lead to a clash of absolutes. Religious absolutists might claim that their religion requires them to proselytize or that freedom of religion for them implies the freedom to proclaim religious messages in their classrooms.

The pragmatic approach avoids such a clash of absolutes and argues instead that given the fact of diversity, a pragmatic modus vivendi is in the interests of all parties. I think that is enough even despite the fact that authors such as Habermas and Rawls want us to aim for consensus about public reason that is more than a mere modus vivendi.

One good reason that religious people should support the idea of freedom of religion is that they may end up on the losing end of a struggle for power. One wonders what proponents of religion in the schools would think if some non-Christian religion such as Islam or Hinduism was being displayed on classroom walls or promoted in school prayers or ceremonies. A basic “how would you like it, if they did that to you?” argument seems to point in the direction of neutrality and tolerance as a modus vivendi that does not require any more substantial commitment to some idea of public reason.

Of course, some of the Christian critics will argue that the schools are already promoting an anti-Christian message and that Christianity is at an unfair advantage. In the Johnson case, Mr. Johnson argued that there were religious messages in classrooms throughout the school district including posters of Gandhi, Malcolm X, the Dalai Lama, and Tibetan prayer flags. If Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism can show up on classroom walls, why not Christianity as well? The Court ruled that the other posters were appropriate given the context (the Tibetan prayer flags showed up, for example, in a science class in which the teacher used them in a lesson on fossils in the Mt. Everest region). The Court stated that the flags were not then “displayed for a religious purpose,” but this shows us the problem for people like Johnson and Wilson. They think that their own religion is being systematically disadvantaged. In response to this worry, it would be very useful to be more clear about the principle of neutrality.

The basic idea behind the neutrality of the classroom is that no religion should be advantaged or disadvantaged, that each should be welcomed and none should be harmed. With this in mind, it may in fact be possible to represent Christian ideas on classroom walls along with posters of Gandhi, Malcolm, and the Dalai Lama, but the context should be appropriate. There should be equal opportunity for diverse views, and, most importantly, there should be an attempt to provide students with the cognitive skills and model of civil discourse that would permit discussion and evaluation of these divergent points of view.

Unless we are willing to engage in an overt struggle for power that may devolve toward violence, we should be willing to tolerate other people’s ideas and beliefs. Moreover, members of diverse communities should agree that it is, in the long run, better for their own communities if the state and the schools remain neutral.

As the Supreme Court pointed out in its Engel v. Vitale ruling, the government has routinely “shackled men’s tongues to make them speak only the religious thoughts that government wanted them to speak and to pray only to the God that government wanted them to pray to.” It is in the interest of religious believers to want the government and the schools to remain neutral, but we also want this neutrality to be productive of education, which means that the schools should also find ways to allow students to debate, discuss, and evaluate religious ideas.

Despite the large corpus of well-established law governing toleration and neutrality, a number of philosophical problems remain. Awareness of unresolved problems is an essential part of the liberal arts model of education, and this is itself productive of toleration: if we recognize the limitations of knowledge, law, and principle, we may be more willing to tolerate others with divergent ideas. Of course, a recognition of limitations and remaining philosophical problems cannot itself be the basis of law: law must begin with an assertion of principles (such as the First Amendment), but outside of the law, things remain fraught with uncertainty.

RELATIVISM, IGNORANCE, AND COGNITIVE FAILURE

Neutrality is an important ideal. Religious dissidents came to America in order to escape the power of the state-sponsored churches of Europe, but we should be careful that we don’t end up stifling debate as we pursue neutrality. Here I have a significant worry about another sort of shackling of tongues. In our current regime of religious neutrality and secular education, we seem to have learned simply to ignore and avoid the difficult religious questions. This strategy of avoidance not only results in profound ignorance about religion but also tends to leave citizens without the cognitive resources necessary for thinking deeply and critically about religion.

In this regard, let’s return to the Johnson case. This case is a reminder of the need for a better way of including open inquiry about religion. It is obvious that genuine philosophical debate is not conducted by hanging posters on the wall. We need to find better ways to discuss our most fundamental differences.
More extensive academic freedom—along with more civil public discourse—could be part of the solution. A truly open and tolerant discussion of religion would be useful in our diverse society. We would have to listen to one another and learn about other points of view, and we would have to understand our own beliefs well enough to defend them. This may be too much to ask for in an elementary school context. But if teachers felt free to discuss religion in an open and inquiring fashion, school would be a livelier place, a place in which important ideas are considered and defended instead of simply ignored in the name of neutrality. Such lively exchanges—if they were conducted with a genuine spirit of inquiry—would open students’ minds, stimulate curiosity, and create a love of learning.

The danger of neutrality is that it can prevent us (students and teachers) from engaging in those sorts of vigorous debates that help expose the truth, as people simply seek to avoid discussion and debate. We need open-minded and inclusive discussion of our diversity, not simplistic posters hung on classroom walls. In our increasingly diverse world, we need to find a way to include lively religious debates in the schools.

The ability to engage in vigorous debate about religion and other value judgments is a sign of complex cognitive development. This basic idea has been with us since Socrates talked with Euthyphro. Euthyphro was unable to follow Socrates’s complex reasoning process and simply broke off the conversation and proceeded on his way. More recently, scholars such as William Perry have argued that cognitive development typically leads beyond a simplistic sort of dualistic thinking toward the more complex thinking that is typical of relativism.

Perry is famous for doing the empirical work at Harvard that established this sort of epistemological trajectory, and he is infamous because his sample set was confined to white males from the privileged East Coast elite, but Perry’s scheme still appears to represent a consensus view. With some refinement and subsequent critique, Perry’s development model has been narrowed down to four major stages: Dualism, Multiplicity, Contextual Relativism, and Commitment within Relativism.

The stage Commitment within Relativism is described as follows by Hofer and Pintrich: “reflect a focus on responsibility, engagement, and the forging of commitment within relativism. Individuals make and affirm commitments to values, careers, relationships, and personal identity.” A related model found in the work of Baxter Magolda identifies four similar stages of cognitive development: Absolute Knowing, Transitional Knowing, Independent Knowing, and Contextual Knowing.

And yet another model, developed by King and Kitchener, identifies three gross stages: Pre-Reflective, Quasi-Reflective, and Reflective reasoning. Pre-Reflective reasoning tends to be absolutist and based on external authority; Quasi-Reflective reasoning acknowledges lack of cer-
nity, me and you." The religious bully has not attained to that stage of development and instead wants to force his or her views onto others. The bully is uncivil, intolerant, censorious, and captious. Research on bullying reminds us that bullies often have high self-esteem and the desire for power and dominance, while victims tend to have lower self-esteem.

To put it simplistically, the bully is an alpha in the pack who preys upon the weaker member of the pack, along with a team of enabling sub-alphas or groupies who cheer on the bully as he or she picks on the weaker kid. In the struggle for power, self-certainty is an asset, and the sorts of doubts and questions that are signs of cognitive development are viewed as a liability.

The other problem is the problem of relativism. Relativism can quickly devolve into apathy, as the relativist concludes that since nothing is true, nothing matters. Relativism can also breed ignorance. If nothing is true and nothing matters, then there is no reason to bother to learn anything. With regard to religion, if each religion is equally valid or valuable (or if each is equally invalid and unvaluable, which amounts to the same thing), then there is no reason to bother to take any religion seriously.

Relativists can safely ignore those values that are relative since there is no good reason to take seriously a bunch of equally invalid nonsense. Notice that relativism is not the same as atheism. The relativist can apathetically ignore religion. But the atheist asserts that atheism is in fact true and that theism is false. The atheist must learn something about religion in order to refute it.

This helps explain the fact that, as a recent Pew Center report showed, atheists tend to know quite a lot about religions. The atheist might agree with the relativist that religion is nonsense, but the atheist tends to think that there are some beliefs that are not nonsensical, such as the ideas of physical science. The relativist, however, does not need to learn anything about religion at all (or about science, for that matter), since there is nothing substantial to be learned here.

The higher cognitive stage of "commitment within relativism," or Socratic questioning, continues to hold onto the hope that there is some truth to be discovered, while also recognizing that particular truth claims are contextually located, internally complex, and subject to revision. This stage of cognitive development requires dialogical skills and empathy, and it is central to the spirit of inquiry that Western liberal education seeks to instill in students.

The higher cognitive function required by this sort of thinking demands that we keep rival ideas in tension. For example, we can remain committed to a worldview or religious framework, while also suspending disbelief and entering into the worldview of another. The cognitive role of voluntary suspension of disbelief helps explain why aesthetic education is useful in higher education (an idea known since Plato and Aristotle and developed by Schiller and the German idealists). As Schiller put it, there is value in play and in playing with ideas—in imagining ourselves into the perspective of another.

Religious critics, such as Douglas Wilson, worry that the Enlightenment model of education is anti-religious. Indeed, it does ask religious believers to suspend disbelief as part of the inquiry, but as Locke and others have pointed out, this is an essential move in the game of knowledge. John Stuart Mill makes this even more clear in On Liberty. We have to explore alternatives and learn to defend our own ideas against these alternatives. As Mill notes, even the most intolerant Church, the Roman Catholic Church, makes use of the "devil's advocate."

To ensure that beliefs are well defended and believed for the right reasons, one must hear the other side. Here is how Mill describes this in On Liberty:

The whole strength and value, then, of human judgment, depending on the one property, that it can be set right when it is wrong; reliance can be placed on it only when the means of setting it right are kept constantly at hand. In the case of any person whose judgment is really deserving of confidence, how has it become so? Because he has kept his mind open to criticism of his opinions and conduct. Because it has been his practice to listen to all that could be said against him; to profit by as much of it as was just, and expound to himself, and upon occasion to others, the fallacy of what was fallacious. Because he has felt, that the only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject, is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion, and studying all modes in which it can be looked at by every character of mind. . . . The most intolerant of churches, the Roman Catholic Church, even at the canonization of a saint, admits, and listens patiently to, a "devil's advocate."

Unfortunately, our current system of education shies away from all of this. One problem is the fear of the First Amendment; some think that the law prescribes any consideration of religion. Another problem is the residual one of religious bullying; some teachers and students do want to proselytize in the classroom. In order to avoid these problems, teachers may simply avoid religion altogether. Moreover, the curriculum is focused on developing competencies in basic factual information, the tidbits, factoids, and skills that can be easily tested on standardized tests. The complex cognitive skills that are required in order to have a philosophical discussion of religion are rarely taught and usually avoided.

This is a bad outcome for a democracy. For democratic deliberation to work well, we need a substantial amount of empathy and the ability to reach the stage of "commitment within relativism." I submit that the increasing incivility in our public discourse is the result of our lack of preparation as citizens for the complex task of negotiating a world of diversity without sinking into relativism, apathy, and ignorance.
Incivility develops easily out of relativism. If all opinions are equally invalid, then there is no good reason to take any value seriously. Indeed, from the relativist’s standpoint, it is easy to mock those who actually do take values seriously. And mockery is a part of incivility, as Locke noted. It is much harder to try to empathetically recognize the seriousness with which the other holds his or her beliefs, while finding a common ground for dialogue and remaining open to self-criticism.

NOTES

5. Locke, Some Thoughts Concerning Education, § 143, 240.
6. Ibid., 240.
7. Ibid., 247.
19. Ibid., 310.
20. Ibid., 310.
21. Ibid., 313.
30. Ibid., 163.