

## Cancel Culture: A Blight on Our Rights of Conscience

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When I thank God for all that He's given to me lately, I can't help but let out a bit of a sigh when I arrive at my unfettered access to the Internet. Please do not be mistaken; I think it is a wonderful tool for gathering knowledge, staying in touch with people around the globe, and talking intelligently about how to better the world around us. Yet in spite of this amazing potential for good, I see far too often how instead it is used as a weapon, tearing down people, families, and even entire organizations in this phenomenon dubbed "cancel culture," wherein an individual can be excommunicated from society for simply stating what they believe if it is not 'acceptable' in the public eye. Often, this attack lands squarely on the rights of conscience we hold in the United States, and to my continual horror, the "cancelers" constantly aim to have these taken away from us in the name of "social justice." Our rights of conscience are inexorably linked to a free and virtuous society, for they grant people the opportunity to sharpen their minds and beliefs with one another through a platform on which they can respect each other as individuals.

In the Biblical book of Proverbs, King Solomon writes that "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another." Although written over two thousand years ago, this statement describes modern civil discourse strikingly well. In response to the inevitable revelation of ideas, one may find stronger ways to express beliefs or even subscribe to the opposing view. As a result, that person is much better off than the man who shuts down foreign ideas at first sight and dismisses them as invalid on superficial or even inaccurate assumptions all before even learning the other's name. For instance, I, a born-and-raised Lutheran, have a Catholic friend with whom I debate on the matter of Christian doctrine regularly. This discourse grants me the opportunity to see into the methodology of her thinking while also sharpening my own beliefs, forcing me to have evidence for my claims and think through them logically so that I may explain them to her. Our discussions never devolve into shouting matches or worse still, playground-level insult contests, and as a result, our civility creates the perfect environment for us to mold one another into wiser people.

Granted, it is difficult to converse when one lacks a point of disagreement. To that end, just as fine kindling and logs make for a roaring blaze, the rights of conscience we so often take for granted are the perfect logs that fuel our necessary fires of civil discourse. While searching for a firm definition of these rights, I uncovered Robert P. George's (2016)

concluding analysis of John Henry Newman's perspective: "The right of conscience is a right to do what one judges oneself to be under obligation to do, whether one welcomes the obligation or must overcome strong aversion to fulfill it" (p. 117-18). Having the autonomy to select for ourselves whether or not we choose to hold specific and varying beliefs is a beautiful thing on its own, but even more importantly, grants that there will be a difference of opinion on what the right course of action is to take within these options. Often times, it is unclear what that proper course might be, so individuals will take a stance on an issue based on their worldview. Inevitably, someone will hold a view contrary to another's belief, and thus, discourse can commence. It is precisely because individuals are allowed to choose what they believe about the world that they might be able to discuss the merits of the issue at hand. Had worldviews been decided for them in advance, there would have been no disagreement and therefore nothing to discuss. Choice produces disagreement that can burn and destroy, but like a campfire, disagreement handled carefully provides warmth, camaraderie, and life-sustaining food for thought .

Moreover, this disagreement that allows individuals to sharpen themselves and each another also grows in them a singular respect for each other; even if they come to no agreement, civil discourse naturally lends itself to the creation of mutual, high regard among the parties involved. Through the process of clear articulation, thoughtful counterargument and cordial banter, people are bound to come to see each other as thinkers who know themselves well enough to admit that they may be wrong. On a macroscopic scale, a society of such people can only hope to move forwards in more meaningful discourse as opposed to less. The person who holds another in high esteem in spite of their different perspectives will be enabled to search for grounds of agreement. As Stephen L. Carter (1999) highlights in *Civility*, "We must come into the presence of our fellow human beings with a sense of gratitude" (p. 281). Take away the choices found in disagreement and you tear from individuals the will to

ask why, the desire to search and be human, and the ability to flourish with one another. After all, even if the state found a way to dictate conversation by silencing some voices and glorifying others, this manufactured conversation cannot be virtuous, and the free, flourishing society will have been hopelessly lost.

Though these consequences are dire, the power of civil discourse is still greater, for its regular use calls attention to that which is the key to preventing this world of imprisoned thought: a greater appreciation for the intrinsic value of individual ideas. We are all unique from the inside out, down to the genetic coding in our smallest cells and up to the ideas in our minds; this fact cannot be disputed. Why then, are many of us so quick to assume we are so learned, justified, or otherwise charged to think that we have nothing to learn from those outside of our own head? Instead of allowing this pride to seep into our minds and conversations, we should hold our distinct, God-given gifts of reason and empathy to the highest degree. Thus, extensive care and respect for unique and unrestricted thinking must fuel the heart of the free and virtuous society. In this environment, great thinkers wring out each idea for its juiciest, most valuable qualities and distill them down into their most concentrated forms of usable knowledge. With these informed discoveries, we must move beyond the tribal divides of cancel culture and preserve the pursuit of virtue. After all, “The key to reconstructing civility, I shall argue, is for all of us to learn anew the virtue of acting with love towards our neighbors” (p. 18) as Stephen Carter (1999) has remarked. At the end of the day, the back-and-forth banter between people whose respect runs much deeper than labels or appearances will bear delicious fruit. We just need to give it the chance and time to work wonders in our lives.

**References:**

Carter, S. L. (1999). *Civility: manners, morals, and the etiquette of democracy*. Harper Perennial.

George, R. P. (2016). *Conscience and its enemies: Confronting the dogmas of liberal secularism*. Ignatius.