

What Price Coexistence?

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What does it take for us to live peacefully and in harmony with each other? This is an ancient question. It is at least as relevant today as it has been throughout history. It is no easy matter to resolve. After all, one man's most dearly held truth is another's blasphemy. There are radical disagreements on what the purpose of human life should be, and consequently, on how to live it.

People's beliefs are shaped by myriad religions, philosophies and schools of thought. They don't speak with a unitary voice, but have their teachings and insights interpreted in a multitude of ways by numerous sects and individuals that comprise them. Considering the importance of life's big questions and the number of ways in which they can be answered, peaceful coexistence is a formidable challenge.

A solution that has found widespread application throughout history and still enjoys strong following is to ensure that other people see the world the way we do. We require them to base their views on the same evidence, interpret that evidence the same way, and reach the same conclusions. The appeal of this approach is obvious - people will generally find it easier to coexist if they agree on what the purpose of life is and how it should be lived.

Even though attempting to convert other people to one's own viewpoint is an indispensable tool of the power-hungry, it is not inherently about the pursuit of power. At its heart, it is about believing our views to be correct, recognising the benefits that they have brought us, and wishing for other people to share in them. There is nothing sinister about this; in fact, it is an act of kindness.

This point was forcibly driven home for me through participation in various Internet-based discussion forums. One of them has a membership that primarily consists of atheists. This is about as far removed from religious doctrine as one can get. Nevertheless, many of these people were quite persistent at trying to convince the religious members of the forum to abandon their theistic inclinations as if these were nothing more than harmful superstitions. What I found even more surprising was that it generally didn't matter what the beliefs in question were or how well they were utilised by the persons holding them; all deviations from naturalism and/or materialism were deemed unwelcome and potentially harmful.

A closer look at these people has helped me understand how those who vocally denounce all religious dogma can nevertheless act as if they were trying to promote one. The most outspoken of them were raised in a religious environment; some have carried their indoctrination into adulthood. Sooner or later they became aware of shortcomings. They may have found that the certainty of their convictions was not warranted by the evidence on which they were based. They may have been endowed with an enquiring mind, and their views could not withstand the endless barrage of questions. They may also have had moral difficulties with some of their beliefs that clearly gave rise to destructive consequences. Whichever factor triggered the change in

their outlook, other factors typically followed, giving rise to an experience that was both eye-opening and liberating. Little wonder, then, that they wished the same for other people whom they perceived as still suffering from the same erroneous beliefs – to experience the same newly found freedom and see the world with the same newly found clarity.

As well meaning as this approach may be at its core, it nevertheless suffers from a fatal shortcoming – it fails to take into account the fact that we are all unique individuals whose ways of looking at the world are inescapably distinctive. We do not share the same life experience, nor do we interpret it the same way, nor with the same goals. We do not naturally fit the same mould.

An often-touted alternative to conversion is tolerance – allowing each individual to formulate her own way of looking at the world. This approach recognises that we have no right to force our views on other people any more than they have a right to force their views on us. Indeed, any attempt to do so, however well meaning, is likely to be unwelcome. A variant of this approach goes further than merely tolerating other people's views as if they were inferior. It recognises that none of us can lay claim to absolute truth and elevates other people's views to the same exalted status that we accord our own.

Whichever variant of the tolerant position we choose to adopt, a question immediately presents itself – how much disagreement should we tolerate before putting our foot down and insisting that a competing view be discarded? This is a crucial question. It arises because beliefs do not remain in the domain of thought, but invariably sponsor action. It is easy enough to let people think whatever they wish to think. It is not so easy to let them say whatever they want to say. When their actions start hurting other people, it becomes downright impossible.

There are some things we have to agree on if we are to coexist peacefully and harmoniously. Being a perfectly private matter, the choice of the worldview to adopt is not one of them. However, the same cannot be said for the effect that our beliefs have on others. If we are to coexist, we have to agree on which consequences are acceptable and which ones are not. This agreement is necessary by the virtue of the consequences residing in the public domain.

If we were to agree that human life is so precious that we should under no circumstances intentionally and forcefully take the life of another human being, conflicts that currently claim lives on daily basis would cease. If we were to take this a step further and agree that we should likewise not allow human life to end due to omission of action, the life-threatening poverty caused by grossly uneven distribution of wealth would likewise come to an end. It wouldn't matter whether, in doing so, people were trying to follow the dictates of their religion, philosophy, or conscience – the effect would be the same.

If we were to agree that the focus of education should be to teach youngsters how to think rather than what to think, the disputes over whose truth should comprise the curriculum and how much emphasis should be given to competing perspectives would likewise cease. Extending this to upbringing as a whole would diffuse all sorts of

disagreements that are fuelled by our desire to force our beliefs and our values on our offspring.

These examples offer an intriguing insight. They imply that it doesn't matter what other people believe, as long as their behaviour adheres to the commonly accepted norms. It is only when their conduct fails to meet the agreed-upon standard that we are justified in attempting to shift the views that have sponsored it.

Reaching agreement on the acceptable consequences of our beliefs might initially appear straightforward, but this illusion is quickly dispelled as we delve into the detail. If we agree that consenting adults should be free to express their love for each other in whatever manner appears most appropriate to them, then we are not entitled to object to our neighbours' homosexual or polygamous relationships. We might support increased emphasis on critical thinking in the school curricula to help youngsters size up the many dubious ideas that they will undoubtedly be exposed to, yet react with horror if our own beliefs were to receive the same treatment.

As the above examples hopefully demonstrate, it is not so much that we have fundamentally different ideas of what constitutes acceptable consequences, but that we fail to appreciate the extent to which our belief systems are riddled with internal inconsistencies. We may like an idea and think that we support it, only to discover that it conflicts with some of our deepest convictions.

An approach to ironing out inconsistencies that I have found useful is to get in touch with the subject matter of our deeply held beliefs. If we believe that human life should be preserved except in the case of a particular group of people, then we should get to know these people so closely that we are able to see the world the way they do. If we believe that homosexuality and polygamy should not be accorded the same status as heterosexual couple unions, then we should come to know people who harbour these preferences so well that we are able to feel what life would be like for us if we shared them.

What this approach enables us to do is ensure that our convictions do not get in the way of our humanity. This is what I believe is needed for us to reach agreement on the acceptable consequences of our actions. In turn, this is the prerequisite for our ability to coexist without strife.

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