

GOOD MANNERS, CIVILITY, AND DIPLOMACY

By Nick Gier

In 1997 I had the privilege of attending the National Seminar on Civic Virtue, an eight-week course at Santa Clara University. As I opened one of the assigned texts, I found a chapter by Judith Martin, better known as Miss Manners. "What is she doing here among all these serious philosophers?" I asked myself.

As I read her contribution, I was ashamed of my initial reaction. I was impressed by her intellectual acumen, and I was also convinced by her argument. Miss Manners is right to claim that there is a basic moral continuum from common courtesies all the way to the enforcement of international law.

Even more profound is Miss Manners' observation that, while the law is the guide for permissible behavior within a nation, we must rely on shame as the sanction for bad manners among people and as well as among nations.

But shame doesn't appear to be working as well as it did in earlier times. In societies where the development of virtue has diminished and the desire for personal freedom has flourished, human behavior tends run unbridled right up to the limits of the law. During its founding and especially with the influx of hard working European and Asian immigrants, America once had a sufficient reservoir of personal virtue to provide internal constraints on behavior, but those moral resources have now essentially dried up.

Those who say that etiquette is a dispensable frill maintain that the modern world has too many problems to bother with good manners. At the top of list of pressing issues, however, must certainly be people of faith hurling insults at each other and calling for the other's demise.

Are not simple good manners the initial answer here? What is more effective than simply sitting down, sorting things out in a civil manner, apologizing when necessary, and shaking hands to seal the reconciliation? Diplomacy, whether personal or national, is etiquette par excellence. While it may not succeed in every instance, it is still the best form of conflict resolution.

When Mahoud Ahmadinejad was invited to speak at Columbia University on September 24, 2007, its president Lee Bollinger broke the rules of etiquette when he excoriated the Iranian leader in his (un)welcoming remarks. Bollinger should not have invited him if he could not treat him with civility. A delegation of Columbia University faculty has toured Iran, has offered an apology for Lee's behavior, and has established exchange programs with some Iranian universities.

In early March of 2008 five Muslim leaders and five Catholic officials sat down for talks about how to bridge the gaps between them, now grown wider since Pope Benedict used anti-Muslim references in a speech he gave at a Regensburg University on September 12, 2006.

On October 13, 2007, 138 Muslims clerics and scholars from 43 countries issued a statement urging Jews, Christians, and Muslims to affirm the two central commandments of their common Abrahamic faith: the love of God and the love of neighbor. Speaking to the magnitude and urgency of the issues, the signatories said that the "future of the world depends on peace between Christians and Muslims."

Led by the Yale University Center for Faith and Culture, 300 Christian leaders responded to the Muslim statement on November 18, 2007. Admitting that Jews and Christians "have not always shaken hands in friendship," and that "many Christians have been guilty of sinning against our Muslim neighbors," the

signatories said that they "were deeply encouraged and challenged" by the Muslim's "historic open letter."

Recently, in a post on a local list serve a member of a conservative church called me a Judas and then a coward for not committing suicide as Judas did. For five years this person had regularly insulted me on this list, but this charge was really beyond the pale. The church elders demanded that he apologize for the offense and he did so graciously.

As I accepted his apology, I thought if I had insulted their church in any way. I went back through my various writings and found one sentence that I deeply regret. I have now apologized for calling these Christians the "Moscow Taliban," and two church elders e-mailed me and warmly accepted my repentance. Notice how basic etiquette works wonders in subtle but powerful ways at the local and international levels.

In the 2007 Moscow City Council election, a member from the same church above picketed in the center of town with a sign calling three candidates "bigots," presumably because he thought their position on a housing ordinance was "anti-Christian." In this instance there was no apology and the pastor, while disagreeing with the mode of protest, still supported the charge of bigotry.

The rituals of apologies and handshakes don't of course always work. After a bully beat me up in the 6th grade, the principal made us say that we were sorry and forced our hands into an awkward embrace. There were at least two things that bothered me about this attempt at reconciliation. I wondered why I had to apologize for just standing there, and then afterwards, I noted anxiously that the bully chose to attack other innocent victims. I blame the principal for not doing a more effective job in pacifying the aggressor.

Unfortunately, the world has its share of shameless bullies, and the use of economic sanctions hurt the tyrants' citizens more than it does them. Even broadly supported military actions had limited effect on Saddam Hussein and the Taliban, and the unilateral invasion of Iraq has been an unmitigated disaster.

In the fall of 2001, Pakistan was the only country that recognized the Taliban, and their diplomats came to the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad every night to drink tea. No one, not even Western reporters, dared approach them. One night Greg Mortenson, a mountaineer turned school and clinic builder and author of *Three Cups of Tea*, joined the Taliban for tea, a civilizing ceremony that is part of many cultures.

Conversing in their language, Mortenson learned that the Taliban ambassador Mullah Zaeef was in favor of releasing Osama bin Laden to the Americans. He also learned that the top Taliban leader Mullah Omar wanted to have a meeting with George Bush, and he had tried to contact the White House twice by satellite phone. The Taliban claim that Bush declined. Just think, however, what three cups of tea with the Taliban or with Ahmadinejad might have accomplished.