

A Modest Proposal for Peace among People of Peace

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Abstract

People in the United States are passionate about a variety of political issues, causing conflicts far too often. In this essay, five steps are identified for reducing the effects of such conflicts, thus improving the chances for peace/harmony among people who disagree. Supportive research is described. Mennonites are people of religious faith. They are also considered to be people of peace. The five steps are described within the context of the conflicts Mennonites are currently experiencing regarding same-sex marriages. The five steps, however, should be applicable to any situation in which people are dealing with very different opinions about very important issues.

Keywords: Politics, Religion, Attitudes, Peace and Conflict Resolution

INTRODUCTION

The political climate in the United States is contentious and has been for many years. People disagree over what to do about the economy, international affairs, use of military force, abortion laws, immigration policies, availability of guns, et cetera. Passions run high, conflicts occur, and partisanship often prevails (Doherty & Kiley, 2016). But is it possible for people with very different opinions about important issues to coexist with minimal tension and less conflict?

In this essay, I propose five steps to improve such coexistence, or to increase the chances of peace among people with very different opinions, with peace defined as “harmony in personal relations” (Merriam-Webster, 2016). I describe the five steps in the context of what is currently happening among a group people considered to be “people of peace” – Mennonites (Roth, 2005).

Mennonites are people of religious faith, and they hold the biblical teachings of Jesus in high esteem. Traditionally, they are depicted as people who dress in modest attire – so-called “plain people” with women wearing bonnets or other coverings on their heads and men wearing stoic-looking hats and dark jackets without collars (Neufeld & Good, 2015). But the defining features of Mennonites, world-wide, are that they tend to foster strong senses of community among themselves, promote relatively modest lifestyles, and are considered people of peace (Roth, 2005). Most Mennonites shy away from conflict, however it might occur.

But Mennonites have not been immune to conflicts – particularly conflicts among themselves. There have been many divisions within groups and sub-groups of Mennonites. Some of the conflicts have been about rather petty differences in how a church member should dress or the type of music that should be allowed during a church service. Other conflicts have been more substantive: for example, the role of women in leadership within a church or larger organization (Green, 2015). Today, there are many different types of Mennonite congregations and a variety of perspectives on these and other issues within the congregations.

Arguably, the primary conflict that is occurring among Mennonites today – at least those in the United States – is the degree to which they accept or honor same-sex marriages. The issue of gay and lesbian rights has been a contentious issue in the United States for a long time, and not surprisingly it has also been an important and difficult issue for Mennonites. When the US Supreme Court announced its decision to legalize same-sex marriages throughout the country (June 2015), the issue became even more important and difficult for Mennonites (De Vogue & Diamond, 2015). Indeed they are divided over the appropriateness of such unions, especially when it occurs among their people and within their congregations.

I acknowledge that same-sex marriage conflicts among Mennonites can occur on several levels – between individual people, within individual congregations, and between larger Mennonite organizations (Cornelius, 2015). For the purpose of this essay, I only address conflicts that occur within congregations. Specifically, how can members with very different opinions about same-sex marriages minimize the effects of such tension/conflict and continue to coexist in the same church building, share the same mission priorities, and worship together?

THE FIVE-STEP PROPOSAL

Here are five steps for increasing the chances of coexistence and harmony related to same-sex marriages for Mennonites within Mennonite congregations. I only focus on such congregations in the United States, because in the United States the same-sex marriage issue is both current and contentious. In addition, I direct each step to congregational members who are perceived to be among the more dominant perspective within the congregation. The more dominant perspective within a group is the one that either has the larger number of members who agree with the perspective, or it is the perspective that benefits by having the most forceful, outspoken members on its side. Admittedly, these steps are also appropriate for members among less-dominant perspectives. But whenever there is a conflict, I believe it is the people who are among the more dominant perspective that bear more responsibility for reducing the conflict.

Avoid the “Ultimate Attribution Error.” In the 1970s, a psychologist named Thomas Pettigrew coined this term to describe our tendency to use more-flattering characterizations for people who are similar to us in some way and less-flattering characterizations for people who are different in some way (Pettigrew, 1979; for a review, see Hewstone, 1990). The classic examples are “When my team wins, it’s because we are good. When the other team wins, it’s because they are lucky.” Or, “When people like me are successful, it’s because they worked hard. When people dissimilar to me are successful, it’s because they had certain advantages.”

So how does the ultimate attribution error show-up among Mennonites? Consider characterizations for how people form their opinions about same-sex marriage. When people agree with us, we readily assume it’s because they are thoughtful. Such people probably use careful discernment to arrive at their opinions, and they are almost always motivated by something good – probably love. But when people disagree with us, we assume it’s because they are less thoughtful. For these people, it’s likely they are motivated by something less flattering – probably fear of something. These attributions are self-serving and unfair. People of peace must be careful, and they should encourage others to do the same.

Understand the role of genetic influences. Most everyone believes a person’s height, hair texture, and eye color are primarily based on genetic influence, probably a lot of genetic influence. And many people also believe that aspects of a person’s personality, like tendencies

toward introversion or extroversion, are somewhat based on genetic influence. Maybe it's 50% genetics and 50% environmental influence. But what about a person's opinion about a politically-related issue? Most people probably believe that such characteristics are based solely on environmental influences – how the person was raised, experiences they have had, who they know, what they read or listen to, and so forth.

Today, more and more researchers are studying the link between a person's genetic predispositions and their eventual political preferences (Smith, Oxley, Hibbing, Alford, & Hibbing, 2011; for a review, see Hibbing, Smith, & Alford, 2014). It is called biopolitics. No one is proposing that political opinions are primarily based on genetics. But the results of many studies suggest that there is at least some genetic influence – perhaps only 10%, but maybe 30%. Several of these studies have shown that identical twins who share 100% of their genetic makeup are more similar in their political opinions compared to fraternal twins who have much less genetic overlap (Hibbing et al., 2014). As several researchers explain, if genetics play a role in setting-up our personalities, then it should be expected that it also does something to set-up political preferences. Personality affects how we process information about the world, and the degree to which we feel comfortable/uncomfortable with certain situations, including things related to politics (Haidt, 2012; Smith et al., 2011).

For Mennonites and other people dealing with politically-charged conflicts (the same-sex marriage issue or not), it is important to acknowledge the role of genetics, even if that role is small. Why? Because there is research to indicate that the more we believe that genetics plays a role in any characteristic of a person (e.g., height, personality, political opinions), the more tolerant we will be for differences related to that characteristic (Hibbing et al., 2014). So if Mennonites acknowledge that genetics might play a 10% role in a person's opinion about same-sex marriages, then they should be more tolerant of their same-sex marriage opponents, compared to believing that genetics does not play any role at all. And acknowledging that genetics might play a 30% role in a person's opinion should increase tolerance even more.

Seek some semblance of balance for all things political. Instead of only looking for opportunities to promote concerns from our own side of the political divide, we should at least occasionally look for opportunities to promote something from the other side.

For people in the United States, Mennonites included, the same-sex marriage issue is rarely an issue in isolation. Other politically-charged issues tend to be related – how a person feels about legalized abortion, how they feel about stricter laws for purchasing a gun, what they think about certain immigration policies, and so forth. Once you know how a person feels about any one of these issues, you probably have a good idea for how they feel about the others, including how they feel about same-sex marriages. As stated, partisanship often prevails (Doherty & Kiley, 2016).

So if someone in a Mennonite congregation, perhaps a pastor, a worship leader, or a Sunday school teacher, promotes a concern from one side of the political divide, they (or others from the same side) should seek ways to balance that promotion by emphasizing something from the other side. But does it always need be a one-for-one kind of balance? Not necessarily.

John Gottman is a prominent psychologist and marriage researcher. He argues that to maintain a healthy and relatively peaceful marriage, every negative or insulting comment from one partner needs to be balanced with at least five positive, complimentary comments from that same partner (Gottman, 1995). For people of peace trying to reduce tensions and conflicts

within their congregations, maybe a two-for-one ratio would be appropriate. In other words, try to balance every two promotions of politically-charged issues from the presumed dominant side with at least one promotion from the less dominant side. For left-leaning Mennonites, that could mean balancing one of their statements about same-sex marriage and perhaps their perspective about immigration with at least an acknowledgment that something sad occurs when a woman gets an abortion. For right-leaning Mennonites, that could mean balancing one of their statements about same-sex marriage and perhaps their perspective about abortion with at least an acknowledgement that the availability of guns in the United States is excessive.

I am guessing that some Mennonites will consider this two-for-one ratio difficult, given the degree of passion that goes into US politics. But be creative. Also, consider spending more time promoting concerns for which almost everyone agrees, as opposed to focusing on so many divisive issues. Then there will be less time and energy for promoting partisan concerns, which means there will be less need to find a way to maintain balance. Personally, I recommend spending more time and energy promoting concern for the poor and less-advantaged people within local communities, the exploitation of girls/women in all its forms, the amount of violence that is portrayed and sensationalized via entertainment industries, and the rather selfish and materialistic lifestyles so many of us lead. Focus on some of these and other possibilities, and then encourage action.

There is an additional benefit for seeking such balance. It increases the probability for actually swaying people's opinions when you want to. When a person is consistently perceived to be a political ideologue, or close to an ideologue, that person runs the risk of not being taken seriously when talking with people who are less passionate about the politically-divisive issues. Evidence for this comes from a study entitled "My Professor is a Partisan Hack." In this study, college students reported that they can usually tell when one of their professors has a political bias. And what do these students do when such a professor consistently promotes political opinions that counter their opinions? Students report that they eventually tune-out the professor (Kelly-Woessner & Woessner, 2006).

Do we really need to wait for a "My Friend at Church is a Partisan Hack" study to predict what happens when a well-intentioned church member does essentially the same thing – comes across as being overly one-sided on a variety of political issues? It is true that such a person can energize their partisan friends who are on the same side of the political divide. But for friends who are less partisan or on the other side of the divide, there will be less influence. There's a message here for all of us: If we truly want to sway people to our own way of thinking, we must consider those who are actually sway-able. It will be to our advantage if we have already established a history of agreeing with some of the things (including divisive things) that those people consider important. Parenthetically, US presidential candidates do the same when trying to win a general election. Present yourself as more centrist.

Understand the complexity of the human mind. Not only do we like to attribute flattering characteristics to the people who are similar to us, as stated in Step 1, but we also like to do the same for ourselves. This is particularly true when we talk about our own thoughts and actions. For this essay, the prime example occurs when someone in a Mennonite congregation says, "I value diversity of opinions," whether about same-sex marriages or other important issues. Given the complexity of the human mind, such a statement is simplistic (Wenger, 2013).

Using functional MRI brain scans, researchers can identify the locations in the brain that are most active when participants are processing certain information (Mitchell, Macrae, & Banaji, 2006; for a review, see Frith & Frith, 2006). When politically-partisan participants process information about strangers who agree with their political opinions, a different part of the brain is active compared to when the same participants process information about a stranger who disagrees with their political opinions. In short, the brain processes information in slightly different ways when we are thinking about people who agree with us compared to when we are thinking about people who disagree with us.

Imagine that tomorrow you meet someone new, a stranger. While talking with this stranger you find out that they agree with you on an issue that you care about. It will make you feel good. The reason is because you care about that issue and you value that opinion. After all, it's your opinion. You will also start to assume some good things about this stranger – probably that they are very thoughtful. Remember the “Ultimate Attribution Error” (Pettigrew, 1979)? Imagine too, that tomorrow you meet another stranger. While talking with this person, you find out that that they disagree with you on an issue you care about. It will not make you feel good in the same way, and you will not start assuming good things about this person. This occurs for two reasons: First, you do not value this opinion, at least not nearly as much as your own opinion. Second, your brain will be processing information in slightly different ways during these two conversations (Mitchell et al., 2006).

Now imagine that I inform you that I have the exact opinion as the second stranger described above. I disagree with you on an issue that you care about. Politely, you might speak the words, “Thank you for sharing that; I value your opinion.” However, you do not actually value my opinion the way you think you do, because you do not value the same opinion when it comes from a stranger. What we value is relationships and friendships with people, not necessarily their opinions. And if the people in these relationships and friendships end-up agreeing with us on issues we care about, then that is icing on the cake. If they don't, it's not.

Within Mennonite congregations, I suspect it's primarily the people who envision themselves to be among the more dominant perspective who are making such self-serving statements about valuing diversity of opinions. It seems noble, and it's something we want to believe. It is also very easy to say that we value diversity of opinions when we do not feel threatened in any way. Thus, saying it is not very impressive. It would be much more impressive for a person who is among the less dominant perspective to state that they value diversity of opinions.

Celebrate successful examples. What do you do when you know a married couple that disagrees over at least one important political issue? Perhaps they disagree over several political issues, and they intend to vote for different candidates during US presidential elections. Do you tease them?

On the contrary, if their marriage is indeed good, then celebrate and hold such couples in high esteem. At minimum, they are modeling that people who disagree on very divisive issues can indeed coexist and share an important space or territory in life. In this case, it's a home, not a church. For these couples, Mennonite or not, it is easier to assume that each person in the relationship genuinely understands and appreciates the complexity that surrounds important issues. It is also easier to assume that within their homes, these couples are less likely to have their opinions continuously affirmed and re-affirmed by over-relying on partisan media sources to get information (e.g., left or right-leaning magazines, radio programs, or television networks).

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have identified five specific steps that people can take to increase the chances for getting along with people with whom they disagree on at least one major politically-related issue. I described these steps in the context of what is currently going on related to the same-sex marriage issue within many Mennonite congregations in the United States. Can that context be changed? I believe so. These five steps are appropriate for any group of people dealing with very different opinions about very important issues.

Finally, to what degree is maintaining peace within Mennonite congregations important anyway? To what degree is diversity of opinion important for any organization? We occasionally hear statements suggesting that “our diversity is our strength.” But is that true, and why or why not? And does it include diversity of opinions?

An extensive study in social psychology suggests diversity of opinions is important and indeed a strength. The title of the study is “Political Diversity Will Improve Social Psychological Science” (Duarte, Crawford, Stern, Haidt, Jussim, & Tetlock, 2015). The authors primarily address diversity of opinions for pursuing scientific truth in psychology. But in doing so, they suggest that such diversity is important for any group of people pursuing truth or betterment of any kind. They argue that diversity of opinions broadens the scope of topics that will be addressed, adds creativity, reduces the chances of one-sided proposals and explanations, and increases the chances that alternative views will always be considered. For similar reasons, I submit that diversity of opinions is indeed important for Mennonites and all other people of religious faith.

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