

RELIGION AND COMPROMISE

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong

Philosophy Department and
Kenan Institute for Ethics
at Duke University

Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics
at Oxford University

A Parable

- Once upon a time, Adam and Eve lived in in peace as neighbors. During a storm, lightning struck a large tree on the edge of Eve's land. The tree leaned menacingly toward Adam's house. Adam was worried that the tree would fall on his house, so he asked to cut it down.

Eve

- Eve want to keep the tree, for she enjoyed sitting in its shade and watching it sway in the wind.
- Adam offered to cut down the tree and replace it with a young tree that Eve could choose and Adam would pay for and plant.
- Each gets part of what he or she wants, and each gives up some of what he or she wants. This compromise enables their friendship to continue.

Abraham

- Eve had three brothers: Abraham, Noah, and Moses. They lived with Eve, so she wanted them to be happy with the compromise.
- At first, Abe rejected the compromise, because he feared that the new tree would not provide enough shade on hot days.
- Then Adam pointed out that, if the old tree fell on the house, Abe and his family would be legally required to pay to repair it.
- That risk was enough to convince Abe to accept the compromise.

Noah

- Noah had plenty of money, so he did not care about paying to repair Adam's house.
- He was fond of the old tree, so he rejected the compromise.
- Then Adam reminded Noah of many times in the past when Adam had helped Noah and his family.
- That history and friendship was enough to convince Noah to accept the compromise.

Moses

- Moses still rejected the compromise because, when the lightning struck the tree, Moses thought that God was declaring the tree sacred.
- Adam reminded Moses about his legal liability, but Moses responded that money is nothing compared to the wrath of God.
- Adam reminded Moses of all he had done for him, but Moses responded that God gave him life.
- Adam claimed, “Maybe God was wrong about the tree being sacred.” Moses yelled, “Blasphemy!”
- Adam asked, “How do you know your vision came from God?” Moses answered, “I have faith.”

Uncompromising

- Adam appealed to Eve, Abe, and Noah, but they could not convince him or agree without their brother.
- The deal fell through.
- The tree fell on Adam's house.
- Eve and her brothers had to pay for the repairs.
- They were never friends again.

The Lesson

- My thesis is that many religious beliefs have a tendency to undermine good compromises in much the same way as Moses's vision.
- Of course, no parable can show this is true.
- To argue for this thesis, I need to
 - Define what a compromise is
 - Clarify when a compromise is good
 - Specify which religious beliefs create the issue
 - Show how these religious beliefs undermine good compromises

What is a Compromise?

- *Thin* Compromises include
 - any non-coerced multiple-party agreement where neither party gets all it wants
 - Examples: buying lunch
- *Thick* Compromises (Margalit) include thin compromises with these added features:
 - Each accepts some sacrifice in its central values.
 - The agreement expresses recognition of the other's point of view.
 - The agreement is motivated for the sake of peace and friendship, not only because it is just.

The Used Car

- A used car is worth \$12,000 to me, but I prefer to pay only \$5000.
- My neighbor has one to sell, and he asks \$10,000.
- Its book value is only \$6000.
- My neighbor says that he wants \$10,000, because the car has sentimental value to him.
- If I offer \$6000 because that is a fair price, then this compromise would not be thick.
- If I offer \$7000 because I don't want to shop more, then this compromise would not be thick.
- If I offer \$8000 in order to express recognition of the car's sentimental value and to gain peace with my neighbor, then the compromise would be thick.

When is Compromise Good?

- Some thick compromises are good, even when they do not rest on any principle.
- Example: \$8000 for the neighbor's car.

***Willie and Lucille Peevyhouse v.
the Garland Coal and Mining Company***
(Supreme Court of Oklahoma, 382 P. 2d 109, 1962)

- Peevyhouses leased land to Garland for strip mining.
- Garland agreed to restore the land to its prior condition.
- Garland paid the lease but did not restore the land.
- The Court could order Garland to restore the land.
- It would cost Garland \$29,000 to restore the land.
- The Peevyhouses sued for only \$28,000.
- The whole farm would have been worth \$300 after restoration, so the loss in value must be less than that.
- How much should the Peevyhouses get in damages?
- The Court gave them \$5000.

Bad Compromises

- Not all compromises are good.
- Example: notorious compromise with the Nazis at the start of WWII
- Why was this compromise bad? Because
 - Bad effects in the long run
 - Violated basic human rights
- Some compromises are bad on religious standards even though they are not bad on any non-religious standards.

A Standard

- Let's assume that a compromise is good when it would make the world better and would not violate too many human rights.
- My thesis, then, is that religion undermines some compromises that are good when judged independently of religious beliefs.

What is Undermining?

- To *causally* undermine a compromise is to prevent it (that is, to cause it not to be accepted).
- To *rationally* undermine a compromise is to make it irrational for one of the parties to accept it.
- If people are less likely to do what is irrational, then to rationally undermine a compromise is also likely to causally undermine it.
- We still need empirical evidence to show that the compromise really does not occur.
- But for now I will argue mainly that religious beliefs rationally undermine good compromises.
- This will make the causal hypothesis plausible.

How Religion Undermines Thick Compromises

- *Thick* Compromise requires:
 - Sacrifice in a central value
 - Recognition of the other's point of view
 - Desire for peace and friendship
- Certain religious beliefs
 - Rule out any sacrifice in religious values that are supposed to be infinite and absolute.
 - Rule out recognition of the viewpoints of other religions as heresy, idolatry, ignorance, etc.
 - Diminish value of non-religious way of life.

What is Religion?

- Religion has many aspects:
 - Ritual and practice
 - Community
 - Belief
- Religious beliefs are too diverse to try to define or discuss them all at once.

Which Religious Beliefs?

- I am concerned with religions that claim:
 - There is a God who is all-good and all-knowing.
 - God revealed His will in a sacred text.
 - Some people (priests, ministers, rabbis, etc.) are authorities and have a special relation to God.
 - Some people go to Heaven, and others to Hell.
- This subset of religions is important, because it includes some of the most widespread and powerful religions today, including Evangelical Christianity and most other Christians and Muslims.

How Religions Undermine Compromise

- The relevant religious beliefs are not about compromise but still get in the way of compromise.
- Examples
 - 1: Only some go to Heaven or Hell.
 - 2: Believers are Born Again.
 - 3: God is Perfect.

1: The Big Hs

- Compromise requires that each side accepts some sacrifice in its central values.
- It is never worth going to Hell for the sake of some other value, such as friendship or peace. (“What can it profit a man to gain the whole world but lose his soul?”)
- It is not enough to deny Hell, because the same point applies to losing eternal reward in Heaven.
- Hence, no rational person will accept a compromise that would lead either towards Hell or away from Heaven.

Beliefs about Heaven & Hell

- *Exclusivism*: Only believers are saved.
- *Preferentialism*: Believers are more likely to be saved.
- *Universalism*: Everyone is saved.
- All Southern Baptists and many Muslims are exclusivists.
- The Catholic Church reportedly held exclusivism until Vatican II (1962-65) when it became preferentialist.
- Preferentialism has same implications for compromise as exclusivism does. If a sacrifice creates a tiny risk of eternal torment in hell, then the sacrifice and the compromise become irrational.

Universalism?

- Carlton Pearson ran an evangelical mega-church.
- He saw a news story about refugees in Rwanda and thought they must be going to Hell if they're Muslims.
- At that moment, he had a revelation that "After death, everyone is redeemed. Everyone." Pearson calls this universalism the "Gospel of Inclusion."
- In response, prominent evangelicals denounced and ostracized Pearson. His church greatly diminished.
- Thus, although universalism is a coherent doctrine, it has severe practical and social costs.

Quasi-Sovereignty

- Imagine a theocratic community like Island Pond, VT.
- Liberals (Swaine) might compromise:
 - Allow them to keep out women in trousers.
 - Do not allow them to beat children.
- This compromise cannot satisfy the religious group:
 - “Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die. Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death.” (*Proverbs* 23:13-14: see also 13:24, 20:30)
- Compromise did work with Mormons on polygamy, but why? Maybe because polygamy was allowed and sometimes encouraged but not required by Mormons.

2: Rebirth

- Many religious believers claim to be born again into a new life. They see their old life as sinful and empty.
- Then they lose any motivation to sacrifice a central value in their new life for the sake of any value in their old life, such as peace, prosperity, or old friends.
- “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.” (*Luke 14:26*; see also *Matthew 10:35*)
- That is how distinguishing the new life as a member of the religion undermines compromise.

An Application

- “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates.” *Exodus 20:3-17*
- Jesus modified it, but only because he was special. Normal humans can't change this.
- They can interpret what counts as work: Cooking food? Reading? Still, fixing plumbing is clearly work.
- Imagine that your old mother's plumbing leaks, and she need help on the Sabbath. Your son wants to help her.

3: God's Perfection

- If God is all-good and all-knowing, then you should never accept any compromise that God opposes.
- It does not matter how reasonable and useful the compromise seems to you, a mere mortal.
- The only way to defend the compromise is to deny that God opposes that compromise.
- So the question becomes epistemological: How can we know what God opposes?
 - Religious experience and prayer
 - Sacred texts
 - Religious leaders

3.1: Religious Experience

- Suppose you pray and then God seems to tell you not to compromise a certain value.
- Then you can't compromise that value without doubting that it was God who spoke to you.
- But if you doubt that it was God on this occasion, then you should also doubt whether God speaks at other times.
- This doubt will strike at the basis of your religious beliefs in general.
- Hence, in order to maintain your religious belief, you will need to reject the compromise.

A Biblical Example

- “So Joshua defeated the whole land; he left none remaining, but destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel commanded.” (*Joshua 10:40*)
- Once Joshua determined what God commanded, he couldn't compromise by leaving a few kittens breathing.

3.2: Scripture

- If a certain text is inspired by God and if God is both all knowing and all good (including truthful), then the sacred text is infallible.
- Some deny this, but why?
- Suppose also that the sacred text opposes a compromise that would otherwise be good.
- Then that compromise must not be good, regardless of any other reasons for it.
- The only way to justify the compromise is to reinterpret the text in order to reach a result that you want but the text seems to oppose.
- Buffet Christians are not real Christians.
- That is how religious texts undermine compromise for real believers.

A Problem Passage

- “Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.” (*Ephesians* 5:24; see also *Colossians* 3:18, *1 Peter* 3:1)
- No compromise is possible because it clearly says, “everything.”

3.3: Religious Authorities

- Suppose that a certain religious authority has special access to God or insight into God's will.
- Suppose that this authority announces that an otherwise reasonable compromise is contrary to God's will.
- Then the only way to accept the compromise is to question the authority.
- If you question this authority, why accept that anyone else is a religious authority?
- To question all religious authorities would be to give up a central part of the religion.
- Hence, true believers must reject the compromise.

3.3: The Pope

- When the Pope speaks ex cathedra, he is supposed to be infallible, so true Catholics cannot accept any compromise that runs contrary to his promouncement.
- A 15-year-old rape victim in Ireland became pregnant and travelled to London to get an abortion, but the Irish government arrested her and charged her with murder as soon as she returned.

What I am NOT saying

- I am NOT saying that religious people do not compromise.
 - Most religious people are more flexible and sensitive than the dogmas of their religion.
- I am NOT saying that religious doctrines never call for compromise:
 - Some religions call for compromise in many matters where neither alternative is beyond bounds by religious standards.
- I am NOT saying that we should always compromise:
 - Some compromises are bad.

The Place for Compromise

Religion undermines some bad compromises.
There is nothing wrong with that.

Other compromises are good for all concerned.
Religion also undermines good compromises.
There is something wrong with that.

Conflicts Become Wars

- What undermines compromise exacerbates conflicts and turns conflicts into wars.
- The point is not that the conflicts arise from religion.
- The point is, instead, that conflicts turn into wars if compromise is ruled out.

Motivations and Causes

- I do not disagree with Pape (2005): Islamic suicide bombing “has a simple strategic goal: to compel the United States and its allies to withdraw from the Arabian Peninsula and other Muslim countries.”
- This motivation is compatible with my claim that rejection of compromise makes the war more likely and worse.

Is War Bad?

- Religious believers might respond that conflict is not so bad.
- “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.” (*Matthew 10:35*).
- But this admits that religion undermines compromise and leads to conflict.

Absolutism

- This problem is NOT restricted to religion
 - Kant on lying for altruistic motives
 - The rules of war forbid all preventive war.
- The point is that religion is one source of absolutism.
- Thus, secular people cannot avoid the problem just by giving up religion.
- BUT absolutism is still a problem for religion, even if not *only* for religion.

Speculations

- How could these religious beliefs become so popular if they are so costly?
- Maybe these religious beliefs function to prevent bad compromises, but then they over-generalize and prevent other compromises that are good.

Conclusions

- When religion prevents compromise, then we should be careful and look again at whether the compromise is good.
- When it still looks good, we should make the compromise and reject the religion.
- We could reinterpret the religion, but that amounts to giving up part of religion.
- In the end, if we want to reduce conflict, we need to reject at least those parts of religion that undermine compromise.

That's All Folks!

- Thanks for your attention.
- Your questions are welcome.