

Moral Frameworks and the Division of Indiana Yearly Meeting

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Moral Frameworks and Quaker Divisions

I have been following the blogs of two Friends whose ministry I highly recommend. Conservative Friend Isabel Penraeth has been exploring the work of psychologist Jonathan Haidt (pronounced 'height') and his colleagues on moral frameworks in the context of Quaker culture—or perhaps I should say the plural: Quaker *cultures*—in an article in this issue of *Friends Journal* (“Understanding Ourselves, Respecting the Differences”) and more extensively in her excellent blog (<http://isabel.penraeth.com/post/24485040269/understanding-ourselves-respecting-the-differences>). Isabel’s comments have been extremely thoughtful and useful, I think, in understanding our own Quaker moral differences and conflicts, and her critique of Haidt’s work is really insightful.

And Joshua Brown, pastor of West Richmond Meeting in Richmond, Indiana, has been writing about the decision of Indiana Yearly Meeting to divide over his meeting’s decision to full welcome everyone into their fellowship, including gays and lesbians. He’s been asking great questions and he’s stayed centered in God’s love.

I want to bring together the conversations they have started, and apply some of Isabel’s and Haidt’s insights to the divisions in Indiana YM.

Jonathan Haidt’s work focuses on how the moral frameworks he has identified inform today’s culture wars, and, like Isabel, I want to look at how Haidt’s description of human moral decision-making applies to Friends. But I want to focus more pointedly on the issues we struggle with. I am thinking specifically of how thinking about Haidt’s approach to moral frameworks might shed light on the current divisions in Indiana Yearly Meeting, and also to FUM’s policy of not hiring homosexuals to their staff.

Here’s how Jonathan Haidt explains his work on his website ([Jonathan Haidt's faculty website at the University of Virginia](#))

Moral Foundations Theory was created by a group of social and cultural psychologists to understand why morality varies so much across cultures yet still shows so many similarities and recurrent themes. In brief, the theory proposes that six (or more) innate and universally available psychological systems are the foundations of “intuitive ethics.” Each culture then constructs virtues, narratives, and institutions on top of these foundations, thereby creating the unique moralities we see around the world, and conflicting within nations too. The foundations are:

1) Care/harm: This foundation is related to our long evolution as mammals with attachment systems and an ability to feel (and dislike) the pain of others. It underlies virtues of kindness, gentleness, and nurturance.

2) Fairness/cheating: This foundation is related to the evolutionary process of reciprocal altruism. It generates ideas of justice, rights, and autonomy. [Note: In our original conception, Fairness included concerns about equality, which are more strongly endorsed by political liberals. However, as we reformulated the theory in 2011 based on new data, we emphasize proportionality, which is endorsed by everyone, but is more strongly endorsed by conservatives]

3) Liberty/oppression: This foundation is about the feelings of reactance and resentment people feel toward those who dominate them and restrict their liberty. Its intuitions are often in tension with those of the authority foundation. The hatred of bullies and dominators motivates people to come together, in solidarity, to oppose or take down the oppressor.

4) Loyalty/betrayal: This foundation is related to our long history as tribal creatures able to form shifting coalitions. It underlies virtues of patriotism and self-sacrifice for the group. It is active anytime people feel that it's "one for all, and all for one."

5) Authority/subversion: This foundation was shaped by our long primate history of hierarchical social interactions. It underlies virtues of leadership and followership, including deference to legitimate authority and respect for traditions.

6) Sanctity/degradation: This foundation was shaped by the psychology of disgust and contamination. It underlies religious notions of striving to live in an elevated, less carnal, more noble way. It underlies the widespread idea that the body is a temple which can be desecrated by immoral activities and contaminants (an idea not unique to religious traditions). [In his early work, Haidt used the words "Purity/Impurity to describe this framework.]

Much of our present research involves applying the theory to political "cultures" such as those of liberals and conservatives. The current American culture war, we have found, can be seen as arising from the fact that liberals try to create a morality relying primarily on the Care/Harm foundation, with additional support from the Fairness/Cheating and Liberty/Oppression foundations. Conservatives, especially religious conservatives, use all six foundations, including Loyalty/Betrayal, Authority/Subversion, and Sanctity/Degradation. The culture war in the 1990s and early 2000s centered on the legitimacy of these latter three foundations. In 2009, with the rise of the Tea Party [and then the Occupy movement—comment mine], the culture war shifted away from social issues such as abortion and homosexuality, and became more about differing conceptions of fairness (equality vs. proportionality) and liberty (is government the oppressor or defender?).

Here is Isabel on how this applies to Friends:

Broadly speaking, Friends of the Liberal branch *tend* to hold a liberal moral viewpoint [that is, embrace Care/Harm, Fairness/Cheating, and Liberty/Oppression as their primary moral frameworks—comment mine] and Friends of the Evangelical and Conservative branches *tend* to hold conservative moral viewpoints [emphasizing

Loyalty/Betrayal, Authority/Subversion, and Sanctity/Degradation]. These moral viewpoints align somewhat, but not perfectly, with political viewpoints. Differing moral viewpoints are a significant source of conflict both within and between branches.

In a later post, I want to add to this discussion the work of Carol Gilligan in her landmark book *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, which looks at gender differences in constructing moral frameworks. But here, I want to look for a moment at what these six moral foundations mean for Friends, and specifically, how they shed light on divisions in Indiana YM, tensions surrounding FUM's policy of not hiring homosexuals, and, in general, our struggles with homosexuality and authority.

I agree with Isabel that Evangelical and Conservative Friends tend to emphasize and favor the 'conservative' moral frameworks (Loyalty/Betrayal, Authority/Subversion, and Sanctity/Degradation) more than Liberal Friends do.

I want to look at these three conservative moral frameworks in turn.

Sanctity/Degradation and Indiana Yearly Meeting

What's at work when a Quaker community feels it can no longer sustain religious fellowship with a community that fully welcomes gays and lesbians into its communion? Jonathan Haidt would say that Indiana YM is acting on its moral concern for Sanctity, Authority, and Loyalty. How does such welcome violate a sense of Sanctity?

Here we are talking, I think, about the perceived sanctity of marriage and, more directly perhaps, the sanctity of the body (thinking here of popular images of male-male sex, because when we're talking about 'homosexuality' in a religious context, we're almost always talking about gay men and their sex). When Haidt originally developed these six moral frameworks, he called Sanctity "Purity," and I think this gets a little closer to the issue here. The reaction to a violation of Purity is moral revulsion and this is really the point.

The thing about Sanctity-Purity is that it is contagious. Or rather, *impurity* and degradation are contagious. Purity must be constantly maintained and it must be reestablished once lost. Impurity, however, sticks until you get rid of it. Eating from plates that have not been sequestered from non-kosher foods will contaminate kosher foods. Contact with a woman in her moontime will make you impure. Allowing a meeting that welcomes homosexuals to remain in your fellowship could influence other meetings and Friends to liberalize their own relationships to homosexuals. Hiring homosexuals (speaking here of FUM, which has a policy of not hiring homosexuals) could compromise the gospel work of the community. "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?" said Paul (2 Cor 6:14).

Now, separating from a meeting that fully welcomes homosexuals or not hiring homosexuals, in the case of FUM, violates the moral frameworks of Fairness and Care. It's discrimination and it hurts people, which we normally feel are morally wrong. So we have competing moral frameworks here, and, for Indiana Yearly Meeting and Friends United Meeting, Sanctity/Degradation trumps Fairness/Cheating and Care/Harm. From Haidt's

point of view, these bodies are not acting immorally by deciding to be unfair and to hurt people; rather they are answering to a different set of moral imperatives than the ones Liberal Friends hold dear.

What about this Liberal point of view? For most Liberal Friends, Fairness and especially, Care, trump Sanctity-Purity. As Isabel has pointed out, Liberal Friends do hold things sacred, just different things (one of her examples is the ecological integrity of the earth). However, harming another person is just about as bad—as immoral—as an action can be. And I suspect that most conservative Evangelical Friends agree. But here they make an exception—they are willing to discriminate and to hurt. Why?

The question I have is *why* Indiana YM and FUM feel justified in their emphasis of Sanctity-Purity over Fairness and Care. (Note that I don't think they've abandoned these moral perspectives. If they had, it wouldn't have taken years to reach their decisions. Clearly, they also feel the conflicting claims of Fairness and Care.) I think the answer lies in the framework of Authority/Subversion.

Authority/Subversion

Besides Sanctity, the Indiana divisions are also about Authority and Loyalty. On Authority: who has Authority, where does it come from, and who gets to exercise it?

For Evangelical Friends, the Authority of the Bible trumps all other forms of Authority. For many Evangelicals, in fact, I suspect that the Bible as Authority trumps all other moral frameworks, period. I suspect that this goes hand in hand with the tendency to emphasize the Authority of God—God as king, lawmaker, and judge—over His (sic) other attributes. His Authority even trumps Care/Harm because God's judgment—His Authority—represents the ultimate Care (heaven) and the ultimate Harm—hell. If God is willing to sentence sinners to hell, then we must be willing to exercise Authority on behalf of the gospel, as well, and the harm that we do in His name is justified.

Does the Authority of Scripture and of the Father-Judge also trump even the Authority of the Holy Spirit? This is one of the core issues in the evolution of the Quaker movement to the present day. On the authority of the Holy Spirit, we have thrown over (or at least radically reinterpreted) such biblical injunctions as that of denying women speech in meeting and celebrating the outward Eucharist and outward water baptism. So we've been balancing the Authority of scripture against that of the Teacher for a long time, with tremendous subtlety and creativity.

Presumably, West Richmond Meeting experienced a gathered meeting for business in worship when they approved the gay-welcoming minute that started the current divisions in Indiana YM. They felt led by Christ to understand Scripture in a new way in the same way that earlier Friends felt led when they eschewed water baptism. I suspect that Indiana YM just doesn't believe that West Richmond was really gathered in the spirit of Christ, believing instead, essentially, that the meeting was deluded. Now, from the evangelical perspective, I think, when a Quaker meeting is deluded into thinking they are following the spirit of Christ when they really aren't, then they are perforce probably following the Father of Lies. To which the proper response is separation—"Get behind me, Satan!"

Though subject, of course, to widely varying interpretations, the Bible is in many ways a more solid foundation for corporate moral decision-making than the vague, shifting, more relativistic foundation for Liberal Quaker corporate moral decision-making. In fact, just what is the Liberal foundation? The Spirit, vaguely defined? Or—God forbid—consensus? One can see the appeal of a scripturally based foundation for moral Authority.

Loyalty/Betrayal

Then there's Loyalty. Loyalty is about identity and boundaries, who's in and who's out, who we are—and who we aren't. Much of the pain experienced in Indiana comes down to a sense of betrayal, I suspect. At least, that's the impression I get from reading Joshua's blog. I'm not sure whether this applies to Indiana's divisions, but among Friends generally, I think, the Liberal and Evangelical branches define Loyalty quite differently. For Evangelical Friends, the primary Loyalty is inextricably tied to the primary Authority: one owes loyalty to Christ and to the gospel as you understand it—that is, to the Bible, or, in practical fact, to *your interpretation* of the Bible. For Liberal Friends, Loyalty tends to be committed to each other, to the fellowship, to community. As Isabel puts it [Understanding Ourselves, Respecting the Differences](#)) Evangelical friends identify as Christians first and Quakers second; Conservative Friends identify as Quakers and then Christians; Liberal Friends identify as just Quakers.

Many Friends in Indiana YM, I suspect, feel betrayed by West Richmond. West Richmond, I suspect, feels betrayed by the Yearly Meeting. Gay and lesbian Friends probably feel betrayed by the conservative Indiana Friends who can no longer conscience fellowship with them out of a sense of Sanctity–Purity, and by FUM, which actively discriminates against them. These Betrayals are forms of Harm, which is the flipside of Care. So these frameworks overlap. Betrayal is a form of Harm, a betrayal of Care.

All these frameworks are more clearly understood in terms of their negative. We condemn harm, cheating, oppression, betrayal, subversion, and degradation. We elevate care, fairness, liberty, loyalty, authority, and sanctity in reaction to these wrongs. We differ in how we define these things and in the relative weight we give them in our moral perspectives. But the *initial* moral impulse is usually a negative reaction to harm, cheating, impurity, etc.

I join Isabel in inviting Friends to recognize that the Friends whom they might condemn for some of these wrongs are actually focusing on different wrongs and elevating different virtues. There's room for self-examination on both sides.

For Evangelical Friends, I think the basic questions are: Do the Authority of (one's interpretation of) Scripture and the concern for Purity really trump Care? If so, why? And, especially, since the exercise of Authority founded on Scripture always involves choice in interpretation and emphasis, how does one balance the Authority of judgment and the fear of Contamination one finds in Scripture against Christ's commandment of love and his preference for consorting with the unclean?

For Liberal Friends, perhaps the questions are: Do Care/Harm (and Fairness and Freedom) trump every other moral consideration? If so, why? How do Liberal Friends invest and

exercise Authority, Loyalty, and Sanctity? And just what is the Liberal foundation for corporate decision-making?