

# In Favor of Niceness, Community, and Civilization

*Posted on February 23, 2014 by Scott Alexander*



**Content warning:** Discussion of social justice, discussion of violence, spoilers for Jacqueline Carey books.

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**Edit 10/25:** This post was inspired by a debate with a friend of a friend on Facebook who has since become somewhat famous. I've renamed him here to "Andrew Cord" to protect his identity.

I

Andrew Cord [criticizes me](#) for my bold and controversial suggestion that maybe people should try to tell slightly fewer blatant hurtful lies:

I just find it kind of darkly amusing and sad that the "rationalist community" loves "rationality is winning" so much as a tagline and yet are clearly not winning. And then complain

about losing rather than changing their tactics to match those of people who are winning.

Which is probably because if you *\*really\** want to be the kind of person who wins you have to actually care about winning something, which means you have to have politics, which means you have to embrace “politics the mindkiller” and “politics is war and arguments are soldiers”, and Scott would clearly rather spend the rest of his life losing than do this.

That post ] is exactly my problem with Scott. He seems to honestly think that it’s a worthwhile use of his time, energy and mental effort to download evil people’s evil worldviews into his mind and try to analytically debate them with statistics and cost-benefit analyses.

He gets *\*mad\** at people whom he detachedly intellectually agrees with but who are willing to back up their beliefs with war and fire rather than pussyfooting around with debate-team nonsense.

It honestly makes me kind of sick. It is exactly the kind of thing that “social justice” activists like me *\*intend\** to attack and “trigger” when we use “triggery” catchphrases about the mewling pusillanimity of privileged white allies.

In other words, if a fight is important to you, fight nasty. If that means lying, lie. If that means insults, insult. If that means silenc-

ing people, silence.

It always makes me happy when my ideological opponents come out and say eloquently and openly what I've always secretly suspected them of believing.

My natural instinct is to give some of the reasons why I think Andrew is wrong, starting with the history of the “noble lie” concept and moving on to some examples of why it didn't work very well, and why it might not be expected to work so well in the future.

But in a way, that would be assuming the conclusion. I wouldn't be showing respect for Andrew's arguments. I wouldn't be going half-way to meet them on their own terms.

The respectful way to rebut Andrew's argument would be to spread malicious lies about Andrew to a couple of media outlets, fan the flames, and wait for them to destroy his reputation. Then if the stress ends up bursting an aneurysm in his brain, I can dance on his grave, singing:

♪ ♪ I won this debate in a very effective manner. Now you can't argue in favor of nasty debate tactics any more ♪ ♪

I'm not going to do that, but if I *did* it's unclear to me how Andrew could object. I mean, he thinks that sexism is detrimental to society, so spreading lies and destroying people is justified in order to

stop it. I think that discourse based on mud-slinging and falsehoods is detrimental to society. Therefore...

## II

But really, all this talk of lying and spreading rumors about people is – what was Andrew’s terminology – “pussyfooting around with debate-team nonsense”. You know who got things done? The IRA. They didn’t agree with the British occupation of Northern Ireland and they weren’t afraid to let people know in that very special way only a nail-bomb shoved through your window at night can.

Why not assassinate prominent racist and sexist politicians and intellectuals? I won’t name names since that would be crossing a line, but I’m sure you can generate several of them who are sufficiently successful and charismatic that, if knocked off, there would not be an equally competent racist or sexist immediately available to replace them, and it would thus be a serious setback for the racism/sexism movement.

Other people can appeal to “the social contract” or “the general civilizational rule not to use violence”, but not Andrew:

I think that whether or not I use certain weapons has zero impact on whether or not those weapons are used against me, and people who think they do are either appealing to a kind of vague Kantian morality that I think is invalid or a specific kind of “honor among foes” that I think does not exist.

And don't give me that nonsense about the police. I'm sure a smart person like you can think of clever exciting new ways to commit the perfect murder. Unless you do not believe there will ever be an opportunity to defect unpunished, you need this sort of social contract to take you at least some of the way.

He continues:

When Scott calls rhetorical tactics he dislikes "bullets" and denigrates them it actually hilariously plays right into this point...to be "pro-bullet" or "anti-bullet" is ridiculous. Bullets, as you say, are neutral. I am in favor of my side using bullets as best they can to destroy the enemy's ability to use bullets.

In a war, a real war, a war for survival, you use all the weapons in your arsenal because you assume the enemy will use all the weapons in theirs. Because you understand that it IS a war.

There are a lot of things I am tempted to say to this.

Like "And that is why the United States immediately nukes every country it goes to war with."

Or "And that is why the Geneva Convention was so obviously impossible that no one even bothered to attend the conference".

Or “And that is why, [to this very day](#), we solve every international disagreement through total war.”

Or “And that is why Martin Luther King was immediately reduced to a nonentity, and we remember the Weathermen as the sole people responsible for the success of the civil rights movement”

But I think what I am *actually* going to say is that, for the love of God, if you like bullets so much, stop using them as a metaphor for ‘spreading false statistics’ and go buy a gun.

### III

So let’s derive why violence is not in fact The One True Best Way To Solve All Our Problems. You can get most of this from [Hobbes](#), but this blog post will be shorter.

Suppose I am a radical Catholic who believes all Protestants deserve to die, and therefore go around killing Protestants. So far, so good.

Unfortunately, there might be some radical Protestants around who believe all Catholics deserve to die. If there weren’t before, there probably are now. So they go around killing Catholics, we’re both unhappy and/or dead, our economy tanks, hundreds of innocent people end up as collateral damage, and our country goes down the toilet.

So we make an agreement: I won't kill any more Catholics, you don't kill any more Protestants. The specific Irish example was called the Good Friday Agreement and the general case is called "civilization".

So then I try to destroy the hated Protestants using the government. I go around trying to pass laws banning Protestant worship and preventing people from condemning Catholicism.

Unfortunately, maybe the next government in power is a Protestant government, and they pass laws banning Catholic worship and preventing people from condemning Protestantism. No one can securely practice their own religion, no one can learn about other religions, people are constantly plotting civil war, academic freedom is severely curtailed, and once again the country goes down the toilet.

So again we make an agreement. I won't use the apparatus of government against Protestantism, you don't use the apparatus of government against Catholicism. The specific American example is the First Amendment and the general case is called "liberalism", or to be dramatic about it, "civilization 2.0".

Every case in which both sides agree to lay down their weapons and be nice to each other has corresponded to spectacular gains by both sides and a new era of human flourishing.

"Wait a second, no!" someone yells. "I see where you're going with this. You're going to say that agreeing not to spread malicious lies

about each other would also be a civilized and beneficial system. Like maybe the Protestants could stop saying that the Catholics worshipped the Devil, and the Catholics could stop saying the Protestants hate the Virgin Mary, and they could both relax the whole thing about the Jews baking the blood of Christian children into their matzah.

“But your two examples were about contracts written on paper and enforced by the government. So maybe a ‘no malicious lies’ amendment to the Constitution would work if it were enforceable, *which it isn’t*, but just *asking* people to stop spreading malicious lies is doomed from the start. The Jews will no doubt spread lies against *us*, so if we stop spreading lies about them, all we’re doing is abandoning an effective weapon against a religion I personally know to be heathenish! Rationalists should win, so put the blood libel on the front page of every newspaper!”

Or, as Andrew puts it:

Whether or not I use certain weapons has zero impact on whether or not those weapons are used against me, and people who think they do are either appealing to a kind of vague Kantian morality that I think is invalid or a specific kind of “honor among foes” that I think does not exist.

So let’s talk about how beneficial game-theoretic equilibria can come to exist even in the absence of centralized enforcers. I know of two main ways: reciprocal communitarianism, and divine grace.



Reciprocal communitarianism is probably how altruism evolved. Some mammal started running [TIT-FOR-TAT](#), the program where you cooperate with anyone whom you expect to cooperate with you. Gradually you form a successful community of cooperators. The defectors either join your community and agree to play by your rules or get outcompeted.

Divine grace is more complicated. I was tempted to call it “spontaneous order” until I remembered the rationalist proverb that if you don’t understand something, you need to call it by a term that reminds you that don’t understand it or else you’ll think you’ve explained it when you’ve just named it.

But consider the following: I am a pro-choice atheist. When I lived in Ireland, one of my friends was a pro-life Christian. I thought she was responsible for the unnecessary suffering of millions of women. She thought I was responsible for killing millions of babies. And yet she invited me over to her house for dinner without poisoning the food. And I ate it, and thanked her, and sent her a nice card, without smashing all her china.

Please try not to be insufficiently surprised by this. Every time [a Republican and a Democrat break bread together with good will](#), it is a miracle. It is an equilibrium as beneficial as civilization or liberalism, which developed in the total absence of any central enforcing authority.

When you look for these equilibria, there are lots and lots. Andrew says there is no “honor among foes”, but if you read the *Iliad* or

any other account of ancient warfare, there is practically nothing *but* honor among foes, and it wasn't generated by some sort of Homeric version of the Geneva Convention, it just sort of happened. During World War I, the English and Germans spontaneously got out of their trenches and celebrated Christmas together with each other, and on the sidelines Andrew was shouting "No! Stop celebrating Christmas! Quick, shoot them before they shoot you!" but they didn't listen.

All I will say in way of explaining these miraculous equilibria is that they seem to have something to do with inheriting a cultural norm and not screwing it up. Punishing the occasional defector seems to be a big part of not screwing it up. How exactly that cultural norm came to be is less clear to me, but it might have something to do with the reasons why [an entire civilization's bureaucrats may suddenly turn 100% honest at the same time](#). I'm pretty sure I'm supposed to say the words [timeless decision theory](#) around this point too, and perhaps bring up the kind of Platonic contract [that I have written about previously](#).

I think most of our useful social norms exist through a combination of divine grace and reciprocal communitarianism. To some degree they arise spontaneously and are preserved by the honor system. To another degree, they are stronger or weaker in different groups, and the groups that enforce them are so much more pleasant than the groups that don't that people are willing to go along.

The norm against malicious lies follows this pattern. Politicians lie, but not *too much*. Take the top story on Politifact Fact Check today.

Some Republican claimed his supposedly-maverick Democratic opponent actually voted with Obama's economic policies [97 percent of the time](#). Fact Check explains that the statistic used was actually for *all* votes, not just economic votes, and that members of Congress typically have to have >90% agreement with their president because of the way partisan politics work. So it's a lie, and is properly listed as one. But it's a lie based on slightly misinterpreting a real statistic. He didn't just totally make up a number. He didn't even just make up something else, like "My opponent personally helped design most of Obama's legislation".

Even the guy in the fake rape statistics post lied less than he *possibly could have*. He got his fake numbers by conflating rapes per sex act with rapes per lifetime, and it's really hard for me to imagine someone doing that by anything resembling accident. But he couldn't bring himself to go the extra step and just totally make up numbers with no grounding whatsoever. And part of me wonders: why not? If you're going to use numbers you know are false to destroy people, why is it better to derive the numbers through a formula you know is incorrect, than to just skip the math and make the numbers up in the first place? "The FBI has determined that no false rape claims have ever been submitted, my source is an obscure report they published, when your local library doesn't have it you will just accept that libraries can't have all books, and suspect nothing."

This would have been a *more believable* claim than the one he made. Because he showed his work, it was easy for me to debunk

it. If he had just said it was in some obscure report, I wouldn't have gone through the trouble. So why did he go the harder route?

People *know* lying is wrong. They know if they lied they would be punished. More ~~spontaneous social order~~ miraculous divine grace. And so they want to hedge their bets, be able to say "Well, I didn't exactly *lie*, per se."

And this is good! We *want* to make it politically unacceptable to have people say that Jews bake the blood of Christian children into their matzah. Now we build on that success. We start hounding around the edges of currently acceptable lies. "Okay, you didn't *literally* make up your statistics, but you still lied, and you still should be cast out from the community of people who have reasonable discussions and never trusted by anyone again."

It might not totally succeed in making a new norm against this kind of thing. But at least it will prevent other people from seeing their success, taking heart, and having the number of lies which are socially acceptable gradually *advance*.

So much for protecting what we have been given by divine grace. But there is also reciprocal communitarianism to think of.

I seek out people who signal that they want to discuss things honestly and rationally. Then I try to discuss things honestly and rationally with those people. I try to concentrate as much of my social interaction there as possible.

So far this project is going pretty well. My friends are nice, my romantic relationships are low-drama, my debates are productive and I am learning so, so much.

And people think “Hm, I could hang out at 4Chan and be called a ‘fag’. Or I could hang out at Slate Star Codex and discuss things rationally and learn a lot. And if I want to be allowed in, all I have to do is not be an intellectually dishonest jerk.”

And so our community grows. And all over the world, the mysterious divine forces favoring honest and kind equilibria gain a little bit more power over the mysterious divine forces favoring lying and malicious equilibria.

Andrew thinks I am trying to fight all the evils of the world, and doing so in a stupid way. But sometimes I just want to cultivate my garden.

## IV

Andrew goes on to complain:

Scott...seems to [dispassionately debate] evil people's evil worldviews ...with statistics and cost-benefit analyses.

He gets *mad* at people whom he detachedly intellectually agrees with but who are willing to back up their beliefs with

war and fire rather than pussyfooting around with debate-team nonsense.

I accept this criticism as an accurate description of what I do.

Compare to the following two critiques: “The Catholic Church wastes so much energy getting upset about heretics who believe *mostly* the same things as they do, when there are literally *millions* of Hindus over in India who don’t believe in Catholicism *at all*! What dumb priorities!”

Or “How could Joseph McCarthy get angry about a couple of people who *might* have been Communists in the US movie industry, when over in Moscow there were *thousands* of people who were openly *super* Communist *all the time*?”

There might be foot-long giant centipedes in the Amazon, but I am a lot more worried about boll weevils in my walled garden.

Creationists lie. Homeopaths lie. Anti-vaxxers lie. This is part of the Great Circle of Life. It is not necessary to call out every lie by a creationist, because the sort of person who is still listening to creationists is not the sort of person who is likely to be moved by call-outs. There is a role for *organized* action against creationists, like preventing them from getting their opinions taught in schools, but the marginal blog post “debunking” a creationist on something is a waste of time. Everybody who wants to discuss things rationally has already formed a walled garden and locked the creationists outside of it.

Anti-Semites fight nasty. The Ku Klux Klan fights nasty. Neo-Nazis fight nasty. We dismiss them with equanimity, in accordance with the ancient proverb: “Haters gonna hate”. There is a role for *organized* opposition to these groups, like making sure they can’t actually terrorize anyone, but the marginal blog post condemning Nazism is a waste of time. Everybody who wants to discuss things charitably and compassionately has already formed a walled garden and locked the Nazis outside of it.

People who want to discuss things rationally and charitably have not yet looked over the false rape statistics article and decided to lock Charles Clymer out of their walled garden.

He is not a heathen, he is a heretic. He is not a foreigner, he is a traitor. He comes in talking all liberalism and statistics, and then he betrays the signals he has just sent. He is not just some guy who defects in the Prisoner’s Dilemma. He is the guy who defects while wearing the [“I COOPERATE IN PRISONERS DILEMMAS” t-shirt.](#)

What really, *really* bothered me wasn’t Clymer at all: it was that *rationalists* were taking him seriously. Smart people, kind people! I even said so in my article. Boll weevils in our beautiful walled garden!

Why am I always harping on feminism? I feel like we’ve got a good thing going, we’ve ratified our Platonic contract to be intellectually honest and charitable to each other, we are going about perma-cooperating in the Prisoner’s Dilemma and reaping gains from trade.

And then someone says “Except that of course regardless of all that I reserve the right to still use lies and insults and harassment and [dark epistemology](#) to spread feminism”. Sometimes they do this explicitly, like Andrew did. Other times they use a more nuanced argument like “Surely you didn’t think the same rules against lies and insults and harassment should apply to oppressed and privileged people, did you?” And other times they don’t say anything, but just show their true colors by reblogging an awful article with false statistics.

(and still other times they don’t do any of this and they are wonderful people whom I am glad to know)

But then someone else says “Well, if they get their exception, I deserve my exception,” and then someone else says “Well, if those two get exceptions, I’m out”, and *you have no idea how difficult it is to successfully renegotiate the terms of a timeless Platonic contract that doesn’t literally exist.*

No! I am Exception Nazi! NO EXCEPTION FOR YOU! Civilization didn’t conquer the world by forbidding you to murder your enemies *unless* they are actually unrighteous in which case go ahead and kill them all. Liberals didn’t give their lives in the battle against tyranny to end discrimination against all religions *except* Jansenism because seriously fuck Jansenists. Here we have built our [Schelling fence](#) and here we are defending it to the bitter end.

**V**



Contrary to how it may appear, I am not trying to doom feminism.

Feminists like to mock the naivete of anyone who says that classical liberalism would suffice to satisfy feminist demands. And true, you cannot simply assume Adam Smith and derive Andrea Dworkin. Not being an asshole to women and not writing laws declaring them officially inferior are both good starts, but it not enough if there's still cultural baggage and entrenched gender norms.

But here I am, defending this principle – kind of a supercharged version of liberalism – of “It is not okay to use lies, insults, and harassment against people, even if it would help you enforce your preferred social norms.”

And I notice that this gets us a heck of a lot closer to feminism than Andrew's principle of “Go ahead and use lies, insults, and harassment if they are effective ways to enforce your preferred social norms.”

Feminists are very concerned about slut-shaming, where people harass women who have too much premarital sex. They point out that this is very hurtful to women, that men might underestimate the amount of hurt it causes women, and that the standard-classical-liberal solution of removing relevant government oppression does nothing. All excellent points.

But one assumes the harassers think that women having premarital sex is detrimental to society. So they apply their general princi-

ple: “I should use lies, insults, and harassment to enforce my preferred social norms.”

But this is the principle Andrew is asserting, against myself and liberalism.

Feminists think that women should be free from fear of rape, and that, if raped, no one should be able to excuse themselves with “well, she was asking for it”.

But this is the same anti-violence principle as saying that the IRA shouldn't throw nail-bombs through people's windows or that, nail bombs having been thrown, the IRA can't use as an excuse “Yeah, well, they were complicit with the evil British occupation, they deserved it.” Again, I feel like I'm defending this principle a whole lot more strongly and consistently than Andrew is.

Feminists are, shall we say, divided about transgender people, but let's allow that the correct solution is to respect their rights.

When I was young and stupid, I used to believe that transgender was really, really dumb. That they were looking for attention or making it up or something along those lines.

Luckily, since I was a classical liberal, my reaction to this mistake was – to not bother them, and to get very very angry at people who did bother them. I got upset with people trying to fire Phil Robertson for being homophobic even though homophobia is stupid. You

better bet I also got upset with people trying to fire transgender people back when I thought transgender was stupid.

And then I grew older and wiser and learned – hey, transgender isn't stupid at all, they have very important reasons for what they do and go through and I was atrociously wrong. And I said a mea culpa.

But it could have been worse. I didn't like transgender people, and so I *left them alone while still standing up for their rights*. My epistemic structure *failed gracefully*. For anyone who's not [overconfident](#), and so who expects massive epistemic failure on a variety of important issues all the time, graceful failure modes are a *really important feature* for an epistemic structure to have.

God only knows what Andrew would have done, if through bad luck he had accidentally gotten it into his head that transgender people are bad. From his own words, we know he wouldn't be “pussyfooting around with debate-team nonsense”.

I admit there are many feminist principles that cannot be derived from, or are even opposed to my own liberal principles. For example, some feminists have suggested that pornography be banned because it increases the likelihood of violence against women. Others suggest that research into gender differences should be banned, or at least we should stigmatize and harass the researchers, because any discoveries made might lend aid and comfort to sexists.

To the first, I would point out that there is now strong evidence that pornography, especially violent objectifying pornography, [very significantly decreases violence against women](#). I would ask them whether they're happy that we did the nice liberal thing and waited until all the evidence came in so we could discuss it rationally, rather than immediately moving to harass and silence anyone taking the pro-pornography side.

And to the second, well, we have a genuine disagreement. But I wonder whether they would prefer to discuss that disagreement reasonably, or whether we should both try to harass and destroy the other until one or both of us are too damaged to continue the struggle.

And if feminists agree to have that reasonable discussion, but lose, I would tell them that they get a consolation prize. Having joined liberal society, they can be sure that no matter what those researchers find, I and all of their new liberal-society buddies will fight tooth and nail against anyone who uses any tiny differences those researchers find to challenge the central liberal belief that everyone of every gender has basic human dignity. Any victory for me is going to be a victory for feminists as well; maybe not a perfect victory, but a heck of a lot better than what they have right now.

## VI

I am not trying to fight all the evils of the world. I am just trying to cultivate my garden.

And you argue: “But isn’t that selfish and oppressive and privileged? Isn’t that confining everyone outside of your walled garden to racism and sexism and nastiness?”

But there is a famous comic which demonstrates [what can happen to certain walled gardens](#).

Why yes, it does sound like I’m making the unshakeable assumption that liberalism always wins, doesn’t it? That people who voluntarily relinquish certain forms of barbarism will be able to gradually expand their territory against the hordes outside, instead of immediately being conquered by their less scrupulous neighbors? And it looks like Andrew isn’t going to let that assumption pass.

He writes:

The \*whole history\* of why the institutional Left in our society is a party of toothless, spineless, gutless losers and they’ve spent two generations doing nothing but lose.

One is reminded of the old joke about the Nazi papers. The rabbi catches an old Jewish man reading the Nazi newspaper and demands to know how he could look at such garbage. The man answers “When I read our Jewish newspapers, the news is so depressing – oppression, death, genocide! But here, everything is

great! We control the banks, we control the media. Why, just yesterday they said we had a plan to kick the Gentiles out of Germany entirely!”

And I have two thoughts about this.

First, it argues that “Evil people are doing evil things, so we are justified in using any weapons we want to stop them, no matter how nasty” suffers from a certain flaw. Everyone believes their enemies are evil people doing evil things. If you’re a Nazi, you are just defending yourself, in a very proportionate manner, against the Vast Jewish Conspiracy To Destroy All Germans.

But second, before taking Andrew’s words for how disastrously liberalism is doing, we should check the newspapers put out by liberalism’s enemies. Here’s Mencius Moldbug:

Cthulhu may swim slowly. But he only swims left. Isn’t that interesting?

In each of the following conflicts in Anglo-American history, you see a victory of left over right: the English Civil War, the so-called “Glorious Revolution,” the American Revolution, the American Civil War, World War I, and World War II. Clearly, if you want to be on the winning team, you want to start on the left side of the field.

Where is the John Birch Society, now? What about the NAACP? Cthulhu swims left, and left, and left. There are a

few brief periods of true reaction in American history – the post-Reconstruction era or Redemption, the Return to Normalcy of Harding, and a couple of others. But they are unusual and feeble compared to the great leftward shift. McCarthyism is especially noticeable as such. And you'll note that McCarthy didn't exactly win.

In the history of American democracy, if you take the mainstream political position (Overton Window, if you care) at time T1, and place it on the map at a later time T2, T1 is always way to the right, near the fringe or outside it. So, for instance, if you take the average segregationist voter of 1963 and let him vote in the 2008 election, he will be way out on the wacky right wing. Cthulhu has passed him by.

I've got to say Mencius makes a much more convincing argument than Andrew does.

Robert Frost says "A liberal is a man too broad-minded to take his own side in a quarrel". Ha ha ha.

And yet, outside of Saudi Arabia you'll have a hard time finding a country that doesn't at least pay lip service to liberal ideas. Stranger still, many of those then go on to *actually implement them*, either voluntarily or after succumbing to strange pressures they don't understand. In particular, the history of the past few hundred years in the United States has been a history of decreasing censorship and increasing tolerance.

Contra the Reactionaries, feminism isn't an exception to that, it's a casualty of it. 1970s feminists were saying that all women need to rise up and smash the patriarchy, possibly with literal smashing-implements. 2010s feminists are saying that if some women want to be housewives, that's great and their own choice because in a liberal society everyone should be free to pursue their own self-actualization.

And that has *corresponded to* spectacular successes of the specific causes liberals like to push, like feminism, civil rights, gay marriage, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

A liberal is a man too broad-minded to take his own side in a quarrel. And yet when liberals enter quarrels, they always win. Isn't that interesting?

## VII

Andrew thinks that liberals who voluntarily relinquish any form of fighting back are just ignoring perfectly effective weapons. I'll provide the quote:

In a war, a real war, a war for survival, you use all the weapons in your arsenal because you assume the enemy will use all the weapons in theirs. Because you understand that it IS a war... Any energy spent mentally debating how, in a perfect world run by a Lawful Neutral Cosmic Arbiter that will never exist, we could settle wars without bullets is ener-



gy you could better spend down at the range improving your marksmanship... I am amazed that the “rationalist community” finds it to still be so opaque.

Let me name some other people who mysteriously managed to miss this perfectly obvious point.

The early Christian Church had the slogan “resist not evil” (Matthew 5:39), and indeed, their idea of Burning The Fucking System To The Ground was to go unprotestingly to martyrdom while publicly forgiving their executioners. They were up against the Roman Empire, possibly the most effective military machine in history, ruled by some of the cruelest men who have ever lived. By Andrew’s reckoning, this should have been the biggest smackdown in the entire history of smackdowns.

And it kind of was. Just not the way most people expected.

Mahatma Gandhi said “Non-violence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind. It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man.” Another guy who fought one of the largest empires ever to exist and won resoundingly. And he was pretty insistent on truth too: “Non-violence and truth are inseparable and presuppose one another.”

Also skilled at missing the obvious: Martin Luther King. Desmond Tutu. Aung San Suu Kyi. Nelson Mandela was smart and effective at the beginning of his career, but fell into a pattern of missing the obvious when he was older. Maybe it was Alzheimers.

Of course, there are counterexamples. Jews who nonviolently resisted the Nazis didn't have a very good track record. You need a certain pre-existing level of civilization for liberalism to be a good idea, and a certain pre-existing level of liberalism for supercharged liberalism where you don't spread malicious lies and harass other people to be a good idea. You need to have pre-existing community norms in place before trying to summon mysterious beneficial equilibria.

So perhaps I am being too harsh on Andrew, to contrast him with Aung San Suu Kyi and her ilk. After all, all Aung San Suu Kyi had to do was fight the Burmese junta, a cabal of incredibly brutal military dictators who killed several thousand people, tortured anyone who protested against them, and sent eight hundred thousand people they just didn't like to forced labor camps. Andrew has to deal with *people on Facebook who aren't as feminist as he is*. Clearly this requires much stronger measures!

## VIII

Liberalism does not conquer by fire and sword. Liberalism conquers by communities of people who agree to play by the rules, slowly growing until eventually an equilibrium is disturbed. Its battle cry is not "Death to the unbelievers!" but "If you're nice, you can join our cuddle pile!"

But some people, through lack of imagination, fail to find this battle cry sufficiently fear-inspiring.

I hate to invoke fictional evidence, especially since perhaps Andrew's strongest point is that the real world doesn't work like fiction. But these people need to read Jacqueline Carey's [\*Kushiel's Avatar\*](#).

Elua is the god of kindness and flowers and free love. All the other gods are gods of blood and fire, and Elua is just like "Love as thou wilt" and "All knowledge is worth having". He is the patron deity of exactly the kind of sickeningly sweet namby-pamby charitable liberalism that Andrew is complaining about.

And there is a certain commonality to a lot of the Kushiel books, where some tyrant or sorcerer thinks that a god of flowers and free love will be a pushover, and starts harassing his followers. And the only Eluite who shows up to stop him is Phèdre nó Delaunay, and the tyrant thinks "Ha! A woman, who doesn't even know how to fight, doesn't have any magic! What a wuss!"

But here is an important rule about dealing with fantasy book characters.

If you ever piss off Sauron, you should probably find the Ring of Power and take it to Mount Doom.

If you ever get piss off Voldemort, you should probably start looking for Horcruxes.

If you ever piss off Phèdre nó Delaunay, *run and never stop running*.

Elua is the god of flowers and free love and he is terrifying. If you oppose him, there will not be enough left of you to bury, and it will not matter because there will not be enough left of your city to bury you in.

And Jacqueline Carey and Mencius Moldbug are both wiser than Andrew Cord.

Carey portrays liberalism as Elua, a terrifying unspeakable Elder God who is fundamentally good.

Moldbug portrays liberalism as Cthulhu, a terrifying unspeakable Elder God who is fundamentally evil.

But Andrew? He *doesn't even seem to realize liberalism is a terrifying unspeakable Elder God at all*. It's like, *what?*

Andrew is the poor shmuck who is sitting there saying "Ha ha, a god who doesn't even control any hell-monsters or command his worshippers to become killing machines. What a weakling! This is going to be so easy!"

And you want to scream: "THERE IS ONLY ONE WAY THIS CAN POSSIBLY END AND IT INVOLVES YOU BEING EATEN BY YOUR OWN LEGIONS OF DEMONAIKALLY CONTROLLED ANTS"

(uh, spoilers)