

Are Americans Becoming Uncivil?

(from Apologetics Press)

By Dave Miller, Ph.D.

Depending on your age and generation, no doubt you have noticed a change that has come over much of the American population. Citizens are becoming more discourteous, impolite, and rude. A recent *Associated Press* poll on American public attitudes about rudeness found that 69% of those polled believe that Americans are more rude than 20 or 30 years ago (“American Manners...,” 2005). Perhaps you have approached the cash register of a store or fast food restaurant in hopes of checking out promptly. Instead, you are faced with employees chatting with each other, seemingly oblivious to your presence. When you eventually are noticed, the employees’ nonverbal signals make you feel as if you have interrupted them. What’s more, you cannot help noticing that their conversation is frivolous chit-chat, centered perhaps on social life, or romantic relationships, or dissatisfaction with their employer or fellow employee. The very idea that their jobs actually **depend** on customer satisfaction seems to be of no concern. Where once American business literally **survived and thrived** on the notion that “the customer is always right,” now the widespread sentiment seems to be “I could care less about the customer—just pay me for doing as little as possible.” Attentiveness, generosity, and caring service have all but evaporated. How many times have you entered a restaurant and noticed unclean tables and unkempt floors? How often have you made a trip to the grocery store only to encounter shelves unstocked or in disarray—with the very item you came for sold out? In bygone days, the average grocery store manager would have considered such a situation with disgust—even alarm due to lost sales and customer dissatisfaction—and called the negligent employees to account for their inefficiency.

Another indication of the decline in virtue in American culture in the last 50 years is the behavior of motorists on America’s highways. Where once most truckers were renowned for their unassuming, courteous driving habits and their willingness to give way to automobiles and even extend assistance to the stranded motorist, an increasing number of truckers bully smaller vehicles by changing lanes unsafely, and radio airways are filled with foul language and truckers cursing other truckers. Exceeding the speed limit is now the norm on the Interstate. Cutting in line, tailgating, and angry exclamations are commonplace on the highways of the nation.

Politics has become an even nastier business. Cutthroat tactics and bashing opponents characterize a majority. In fact, the polite, civil candidate is pummeled and left in a state of shock. Children speak disrespectfully to adults in public. Individuals cut in line in stores, post offices, and amusement parks. Telemarketers seem kind and genuinely concerned—until the customer refuses to buy the product.

Then the telemarketer often turns nasty and shows obvious irritation with the consumer. Where once the average gas station provided eager service to customers—not only pumping the gasoline, but washing the windows, checking the oil, and adding air to the tires—it’s now “every man for himself.”

Granted, it could be much worse. Compare America with many other nations of the world. Take, for example, Islamic nations, where the people press against each other in the streets and in the marketplace, jostling each other and competing for services. Many seem to be completely focused on self — with little thought and concern for those around them. But historically, such societal circumstances have not been typical of America.

What has happened? How can such profound change come over an entire civilization? The Founders of the American Republic anticipated just this social scenario—and even described the circumstances under which it would occur. The Founders predicted that: if Americans do not retain an ardent commitment to the moral principles of Christianity, **civil society will wane.**

Consider the following prophetic voices. In the 1811 New York State Supreme Court case of *The People v. Ruggles*, the “Father of American Jurisprudence,” James Kent, explained the importance of punishing unchristian behavior, when he wrote that Americans are a “people whose **manners are refined**, and whose morals have been elevated and inspired with a more enlarged benevolence, **by means of the Christian religion**” (1811, emp. added). The gentility of the American spirit has historically been contrasted with those peoples “whose sense of shame would not be effected by what we should consider the most **audacious outrages upon decorum**” (1811, emp. added).

Such thinking was typical of the Founders. In his scathing repudiation of Thomas Paine’s *The Age of Reason*, Continental Congress president Elias Boudinot insisted: “[O]ur country should be preserved from the dreadful evil of becoming enemies to **the religion of the Gospel**, which I have no doubt, but would be introductive of the dissolution of government and **the bonds of civil society**” (1801, p. xxii, emp. added). Dr. Benjamin Rush added his blunt observation: “Without the restraints of religion and social worship, **men become savages**” (1951, 1:505, emp. added). Noah Webster stated: “[R]eligion has an excellent effect in repressing vices [and] in **softening the manners of men**” (1794, Vol. 2, Ch. 44, emp. added).

The Founders believed that should Christian principles be jettisoned by Americans, manners would be corrupted, and social anarchy and the fall of the Republic would naturally follow. *Declaration* signer and “The Father of the American Revolution,” Samuel Adams, issued a solemn warning in a letter to James Warren on February 12, 1779: “A general dissolution of the principles and manners will more surely overthrow the liberties of America than the whole force of the common enemy” (1908, 4:124). In his inaugural address as the Governor of

Massachusetts in 1780, Founder John Hancock insisted that both our freedom and our very existence as a Republic will be determined by public attachment to Christian morality: “**Manners**, by which not only the freedom, but **the very existence of the republics**, are greatly affected, depend much upon the public institutions of religion and the good education of youth” (as quoted in Brown, 1898, p. 269, emp. added). The words of *Declaration* signer John Witherspoon are frightening: “Nothing is more certain than that a general profligacy and **corruption of manners** make a people **ripe for destruction**” (1802, 3:41, emp. added). In contrasting the general religion of Christianity with Islam, John Quincy Adams likewise explained:

The fundamental doctrine of the Christian religion, is the extirpation of hatred from the human heart. It forbids the exercise of it, even towards enemies. There is no denomination of Christians, which denies or misunderstands this doctrine. All understand it alike—all acknowledge its obligations; and however imperfectly, in the purposes of Divine Providence, its efficacy has been shown in the practice of Christians, it has not been wholly inoperative upon them. **Its effect has been upon the manners of nations.** It has mitigated the horrors of war—it has softened the features of slavery—it has humanized the intercourse of social life (1830, p. 300, emp. added).

There is no question that the influence of the Christian religion in America has been significantly curtailed during the last half-century. So what would we expect to occur? We would fully expect citizens to become uncivil, impolite, and discourteous. We would expect them to abandon the fundamental principle of human conduct articulated by Jesus Himself: “Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them” (Matthew 7:12). As people move further away from Christianity, they will inevitably become selfish, self-centered, and savage in their treatment of their fellowman. The only hope, the only solution, is to return to the principles of the religion of Jesus Christ.

REFERENCES

Adams, John Quincy (1830), *The American Annual Register* (New York: E. & G.W. Blunt).

Adams, Samuel (1904-1908), *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, ed. Harry Cushing (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons).

“American Manners Poll” (2005), *Associated Press*, [On-line], URL: http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2005-10-14-rudeness-poll-method_x.htm.

Boudinot, Elias (1801), *The Age of Revelation* (Philadelphia, PA: Asbury Dickins), [On-line], URL: <http://www.google.com/books?id=XpcPAAAAIAAJ>.

Brown, Abram (1898), *John Hancock, His Book* (Boston, MA: Lee & Shepard Publishers), [On-line], URL: <http://www.archive.org/details/johnhancock00browrich>.

The People v. Ruggles (1811), 8 Johns 290 (Sup. Ct. NY.), N.Y. Lexis 124.

Rush, Benjamin (1951), *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, ed. L.H. Butterfield (Princeton, NJ: The American Philosophical Society).

Webster, Noah (1794), "The Revolution in France," in *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era: 1730-1805*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund), 1998 edition, [On-line], URL: <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/817/69415>.

Witherspoon, John (1802), *The Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon* (Philadelphia, PA: William Woodard).