



**HUNTER GIBBS**  
Environmental Science

## WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF CIVIL DISCOURSE AND FREE SPEECH?

The University of Arizona has a large, active Christian community on campus. While walking to class on the UA Mall, I see a man holding a ten foot tall wooden cross, preaching that other religious ideologies are derived from Satan and that non-Christians lead sinful lives. Others in his posse were arguing with a group of Latinas, arguing heatedly about the impact of colonization of Christian Europeans in the US. All were yelling at each other, utilizing ad hominem instead of logic and reason, inducing polarization - defense of identity rather than trying to understand each other's viewpoints. As a Christian myself who has learned to think critically and be welcoming of people of all different backgrounds into religion, I mustered up the courage to speak with the man with the cross - not to speak of the ills of colonizers of the past, but about how he approached people. I asked him of his intentions in shouting at innocent people, and he said it was to spread Christianity. I didn't spend enough time with him to decipher whether he was hateful or if he genuinely wanted to spread the word of the gospel to others, but I asked kindly if he considered approaching people respectfully - having more developed outreach programs for people who were spiritually lost (NOT including people devoted to other religions) - treating them like humans. I haven't seen the man with the cross at the UA Mall since, but I hope that at least, my civility allowed him to think not only on how he can aid others spiritually, but also on how to approach discussions with people of different backgrounds.

This sort of toxic exchange is a microcosm of the larger issue at hand in America - hyperbolized, highly subjective media headlines plastering the internet, plaguing the minds of Americans with extremism. Lawmakers utilize filibusters to eliminate the possibility of legislative passage, families tear apart over who they voted for, and even everyday exchanges are rooted in stereotypes of the other side. If this isn't enough, complex societal issues are being fought over in Congress - one interpretation of morality pitted against another - in a form of theatrics that goes so far as to subvert actually addressing issues. Abortion is now unprotected, systemic racism is being encouraged as a form of political revenge with immigrants, and climate change mitigation has little progress.

Extreme forms of speech involving hatred and discrimination should always be censured. However, for mainstream ideologies, eliminating confirmation bias - which otherwise would flip a switch in our brains to stop listening to others - is critical in considering other viewpoints - maybe even thinking critically and adopting some of them, finding ways to compromise. A civil conversation is crucial so a common goal can be achieved, whether for a relationship or a nation. Consider - how can this conversation allow me to think differently and further define how cultural viewpoints aid in determining what it means to be human?