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Religion and Public Discourse: Principles and Guidelines for Religious Participants, 1998

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Religion and Public Discourse

Principles and Guidelines for Religious Participants



SPECIAL TOPICS IN HEALTH AND FAITH



THE PARK RIDGE CENTER
For the Study of Health, Faith, and Ethics

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The Park Ridge Center's sixfoil portrays the unending and many faceted interaction that takes place among three major areas of human endeavor: health, faith, and ethics.

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Religion and Public Discourse

An Introduction



BY MARTIN E. MARTY

Today's American "culture wars," all observers know, tend to be at base and at heart "religion wars." If the image of war is a bit too strong, let "religious conflict" do. There have been few dead bodies as a result of the current controversies, yet the time has come for efforts to address situations in which words have become the instruments of incivility.

Walk into a town board meeting when a community is tearing itself apart over what are now called "December wars," and you might want to seek a safe haven. Factions fight factions over whether or not there ought to be a Christian crèche or a Jewish menorah on the courthouse lawn. Clergy on all sides of these debates—there are many factions—get dragged in as moral and polemical reinforcements, with some clerics choosing to plunge in rather lustily.

Listen in to a school board meeting over creationism vs. evolution, or prayer in the

schools, and you will hear more decibels. And whoever *really* wants to see incivility win the day will do well to approach the scene where the ethical side of medical and health issues get debated. Intense enough when they are "merely" ethical controversies, they often fall apart when God gets invoked in support of one position or another.

Irony, isn't it: most of the faiths represented in North America advertise themselves sincerely as agents of reconciliation, advocates of love and *shalom*. Yet many institutions, professions, and communities do what they can to keep religious voices away from the table, precisely in order to promote the very reconciliation that was supposed to have come with expressions of faith.

"Religion is a private affair" has come to be a slogan, almost a shibboleth, of many citizens. They believe that if only matters of faith or viewpoints based on it could be sequestered in the sanctuary or tucked into



Religion and Public Discourse

In the civil rights cause, the movements for women's rights and human rights in general, as well as in debates over population and development, war and peace, the record shows that religious forces played constructive roles.

cubbyholes and closets, all would be well. Let America be a privately religious, publicly secular society, and the situation would improve.

It won't. If for decades some citizens have gone about creating the impression that democracies might make basic decisions without reference to spiritual and religious expressions, they were not reading the signs of those times well. In the civil rights cause, the movements for women's rights and human rights in general, debates over population and development, war and peace, the record shows that religious forces played overt and often constructive roles.

If this record is forgotten, or if a new generation has not learned it, then this must be said: around the world the forces of faith, be they mild or fanatic, benign or murderous, are on the front lines in most conflicts, and the prospects for seeing religion pushed back into the private zone are rather slim. At the turn of the millennium, more people in the world and more citizens of this nation find it valuable, necessary, and even urgent to act upon the premises of faith.

Why?

First, while many people in a society that is called secular and pluralistic are able to develop and express their ethical and political views without reference to any kind of transcendent order, many more ground their

moral choices and social views in profound views of reality that include God, the sacred and the like. They could not refrain from doing so even if asked.

Second, from time immemorial, many kinds of human groupings have derived from religious bases and displayed religious intentions. Sometimes these groups include nations, at other times parties, causes, caucus, or coalitions. The rich diversity of American culture has led many of these to find ways to cooperate and creatively coexist. But the people who make them up are not always able simply to "park their religion at the door" when they enter the public arena.

If some participants in public debate suppress their most profound convictions for the sake of peace and quiet, they will simply yield the platform or the floor to the more strident voices that will in such cases be addressing a kind of void. The entry of more voices, rather than fewer, into the public conversation helps assure that the community will be aware of the diversity and, quite possibly, enriched by it.

The fact that we have to go to such pains to explain why the forces and impulses of faith remain, or have grown newly vocal, may suggest that we believe only the negative side of religious commitment will show, and that it might properly be hemmed in or otherwise hedged. If this appears to be the case, we have given a false impression. For all the problems that have appeared when public discourse includes religious themes, it is also clear that the texts and traditions of faith communities have much to offer by way of including calls for effecting social justice, working toward healing, and provoking profound thought.

If the problems have on many occasions led to disruption of community life, this does not have to be the case. Virtually all students



of the dynamics of public life contend that conflict can be creative as well as destructive. While religious leaders through the centuries have often insisted on monopolies and resorted to civil powers to enforce their views, people of faith have just as often used that faith to resist false authority, bad law, and social injustice imposed by equally ideological, secularly led forces. The voices of conscience, morality, justice, mercy, and ethics in any case are too blended and too dependent upon each other to be silenced now.

The Park Ridge Center for the Study of Health, Faith, and Ethics, committed as it is to fair-minded accounting for spirituality and religion on the healthcare front, has learned that medical issues cannot be isolated from economic and political concerns. What follows derives from Center experience as it led consultations and provided facilitating materials for participants in the International Conference on Population and Development, held July 1994 in Cairo. While many observers agree that the debate at the conference often fell short of expectations, it is possible to build upon the conference's

While religious leaders through the centuries have often insisted on monopolies and resorted to civil powers to enforce their views, people of faith have just as often used that faith to resist false authority, bad law, and social injustice imposed by equally ideological, secularly led forces.

positive developments, and to follow this up by anticipating other such international meetings. These guidelines represent the Center's bid to advance those efforts.

The Center is also committed to making these insights available to domestic, and especially local, communities and their leaders. What follows are some faith-based principles that, we feel, can both help such communities anticipate problems *and* help them find ways for the highly committed to be more civil and the highly civil to show more commitment—and all this for the common good.



The Park Ridge Center would like to thank the following individuals for their invaluable contributions to the Project on Religion and Public Discourse. We list the participants' religious affiliations in order to convey the diversity of

traditions from which they come, not to imply that they officially represent those traditions. Given such diversity, it should come as no surprise that not all participants agree with the opinions in this publication, which are the sole responsibility of the authors.

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To Speak and Be Heard

Principles of Religious Civil Discourse



**BY MARTIN E. MARTY,
LARRY GREENFIELD, AND DAVID E. GUINN**

PREFACE

When people of religious faith enter public debate, they draw on their deepest beliefs—and sometimes express themselves with a passion and vehemence that can quickly turn conversation into argument, and argument into rhetorical meltdown. In 1994, believers made their presence felt on all sides in a stunning encounter in Cairo where, at the International Conference on Population and Development, people of conviction shocked each other and a watching world as they clashed over some of the most volatile topics of the day: family planning and the nature of the family; the rights of women; gender and sexuality; and abortion and birth control. It is hardly possible to take up such subjects in any forum without risking dissension. In a setting where profoundly convinced believers speak up, as in Cairo, what can easily occur is intense conflict and communication breakdown, result-

ing in deep frustration and a legacy of continuing misunderstanding.

People who ground their commitments in faith, however, also have the resources to promote understanding and good will, resources that can be found in their religious texts, traditions, and experiences. Religion can enable believers to combine reasoned advocacy with concern for the voices and convictions of those with whom they disagree. The question is: How can believers consistently advance such understanding and make progress in dealing with profound issues of the sort that surfaced at Cairo?

To answer that question, the Chicago-based Park Ridge Center for the Study of Health, Faith, and Ethics, with funding by The Pew Charitable Trusts and as part of a multi-phased, six-year project on interfaith dialogue on international population and development, initiated a project to bring together nineteen people, most of whom



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In this age of media sound bites and talking heads who shout more often than they talk, far too frequently the public square devolves into a verbal battleground from which only losers emerge, bloodied but unable to see that there is another, more helpful and more edifying way to communicate.

were participants in or close observers of the Cairo Conference. They represent, informally but responsibly, a sample of seven world religious traditions (Baha'ism, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and Native American). In interviews and face-to-face encounters they dealt with questions such as: Should religions and religious people be represented at local, national, or international forums where there are certain to be controversial issues of public import? If, as they all claim, their faith traditions include resources that make it possible for them to speak and act out of conviction while hearing and conversing with those outside their traditions, how do we bring these resources forward? Can there be what we might call "rules of the game" for serious public conversation involving people of faith?

To Speak and Be Heard helps to provide answers to these questions. This project is based upon a wide range of resources from within the participants' religious traditions including practices, rituals, and tenets of faith. While this project grew out of the specific controversies around the Cairo conference, the principles of civil discourse spelled out in this document are general in application and may be used to facilitate constructive public dialogue involving any important

social issue involving people of faith (whether within one tradition, among traditions, or between religious and non-religious groups). Moreover, while these principles are grounded in religious traditions, there is reason to hope that non-believers, who also speak from well-grounded value commitments and are equally prone to lapses in their efforts at maintaining civil discourse, may find them useful as well.

No one can speak for the whole of a religious tradition. In fact, many faith communities do not even defer

to any authoritative leader to represent them. In the Park Ridge Center colloquies, the participants made conscientious efforts to be faithful to their traditions, though they frequently found it necessary to present alternate and sometimes conflicting views on a particular issue. In doing so, they demonstrated how to plumb their religious resources and to bring forward sometimes obscured elements of their faith that help promote understanding.

The participants and project facilitators are working at a decisive moment, as the calendar turns from the end of the second millennium C.E. to the beginning of the third. This momentous, if admittedly arbitrary, transition symbolizes the roiling changes engulfing so many religions and cultures today. Around the globe, people of faith are dealing with urgent questions about the environment, war and peace, justice, community, economics, and precisely the kinds of issues the Cairo Conference took up. Religionists do so at a time when instruments of destruction—whether wielded by terrorists, tribal warriors or nation-states—are more available and more threatening than ever before. Such tools of violence loom in the background of the earnest efforts to use words to address grave issues,




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and those tools are too often put to work when such efforts break down.

This project is an effort to help avoid such breakdown in the first place. It is an attempt to find ways to ensure that civil discourse will, in fact, be civil. In this age of media sound bites and talking heads who shout more often than they talk, far too frequently the public square devolves into a verbal battleground from which only losers emerge, bloodied but unable to see that there is another, more helpful and more edifying way to communicate. The principles elucidated here suggest a way of embodying that new mode of communication, and although these ideas are inspired by and drawn from the sometimes-ancient roots of a wide variety of major religious traditions, together they constitute a new form of civil discourse. That term, "civil discourse," includes all modes of public communication, from a politician's televised speech to a letter to the editor, from a United Nations conference to a demonstration featuring non-violent protest. Civility is not a lack of passion; discourse is not only a string of words. Providing the cornerstone of the new public conversation, civility is appropriate to all modes of communication, both constructive and critical. Most important, civil discourse is geared toward action, toward working together to achieve a common good, and toward achieving real-world goals.

A word about terminology: In what follows we may use a variety of terms in necessarily imprecise ways, ways that cannot be fully satisfying to all people in all traditions. Thus we shall have to obscure some nuances among words such as "religion," "spirituality," "faith," and "belief," and to deal with them with rough equivalency. In other contexts, or as these descriptions and guidelines are dealt with in other situations, it would be necessary to refine them. "Communities" and "traditions" are also used interchangeably here.

WARRANTS FOR CIVILITY: PRINCIPLE I.I



Welcome the diversity of beliefs and opinions

During the Second Vatican Council, one of the major issues on the world Catholic agenda was confronting the irreducibly pluralistic nature of the modern world. Among the many responses to the intellectual and religious diversity endorsed by Vatican II was the concept of *sensus fidelium*, or "sense of the faithful," an idea that had been popularized in the 19th century by John Henry Newman. In his 1998 book *Virtual Faith*, author Tom Beaudoin explains *sensus fidelium* by pointing out that "one way to arrive at a clearer theological understanding is to take stock of the lived witness of the faithful . . . the communal experience of faithful people can be a source of religious truth."

In the words of Vatican II itself, "Christians should recognize that various legitimate though conflicting views can be held concerning the regulation of temporal affairs. They should respect their fellow citizens when they promote such views honorably even by group action." In a passage encouraging "brotherliness which allows honest dialogue," the authors of Vatican II suggested that Catholics "foster within the Church herself mutual esteem, reverence, and harmony, through the full recognition of lawful diversity." Thus, all those who compose the one People of God, both pastors and the general faithful, can engage in dialogue with ever-abounding fruitfulness. ✓



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“Civil discourse” includes all modes of public communication, from a politician’s televised speech to a letter to the editor, from a United Nations conference to a demonstration featuring non-violent protest.

Finally, note that the italicized words *“Those who participate”* at the beginning of each section can and should be read in two senses. First, they are descriptive, in that they characterize religious people who already engage in public debate and rely on their own traditions to facilitate the peaceful interchange of ideas. Second, they are prescriptive, in that they propose more effective ways for believers to engage in civil discourse in the future, including such possible encounters as local controversies, national debates, and international and interreligious conferences.

I. The Nature of Civil Discourse in the Public Square

THOSE WHO PARTICIPATE:

1. *Welcome the diversity of beliefs and opinions.*

Far from choosing to ignore or suppress the bewildering diversity of opinion and viewpoint that is so vivid in the contemporary world, participants in the new public conversations will welcome the many voices that contend with each other

both within and among their faith communities. They willingly engage this range of voices not to contribute to argument for argument’s sake, but to gain insights from those who view the world with different eyes, to acknowledge the reality of the pluralistic world in which we all live, and, obviously, to convince others of the rightness and helpfulness of their own views.

2. *Recognize civil discourse as a process.*

Neither anticipating completely satisfying results or total victories nor expecting the same level of conversation among all who are at the table in the public forum, participants recognize the fact that they are taking part in a process that may improve the argument as it goes along. Even more, they converse and argue in ways that may also position them for common action even before they come to agreement on all the details of policy in the realm of social action. Rather than settling for more division in their own ranks or dissension among religious traditions, as people often do, participants believe that when they keep the common good in mind and respect those with whom they are engaged, they can actually help strengthen their own communities and promote understanding among others, whether in the most intimate local setting or at the international roundtable.

3. *Realize and teach that profound social issues have religious dimensions.*

Informed by history and experience,



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participants in emerging styles of civil discourse radically disagree with those who believe that public actors can satisfactorily address issues involving the common good while restricting themselves to concepts and terms that ignore, suppress, or disdain religious voices. The more profound the disagreements and concerns, and the more urgent the social issues, the more likely it will be that at root religious commitments are involved. This will be the case even among people who are not always informed or articulate about their roots and the possibilities inherent in their faiths. Bringing religious faith to the fore does not and cannot *solve* the issues, at least not by itself. But it can enrich the ways those issues are addressed and render more satisfying the efforts to act in common across boundaries of faith and culture.

4. Understand that religious belief frequently calls for some form of civil discourse.

Because social issues have religious import, people of faith belong in the public square. In an environment where people in conflict sometimes invoke their gods and where aggressive arguers can be unable or unwilling to hear others, there is often a breakdown of efforts to communicate or to address issues in a constructive manner. As a result, some individuals turn away from public conversations because they believe that they cannot express their beliefs with full passion and clarity on a level playing field with others. Others eschew public dialogue because they fear compromise. Still others avoid it because they find it distasteful, fearing that belligerently religious parties will only speak and never listen. But today many religious people of good will are coming to find that it is both urgent and

WARRANTS FOR CIVILITY: PRINCIPLE 1.2

Recognize civil discourse as a process

With its focus on the ongoing process of enlightenment and on moderation in all things, Buddhism offers an important perspective on how to maintain civility during public discourse. Indeed, one of the fundamental elements of Buddhist belief is the Noble Eightfold Path to spiritual enlightenment, which includes "right speech." Followers of the exiled Vietnamese Zen master and political activist Thích Nhāat Hanh have rendered a contemporary interpretation of this ancient Buddhist wisdom training in their Fourteen Practices of the Order of Interbeing.

The second practice, "Non-attachment from Views," demonstrates their take on the Buddhist approach to discourse, which emphasizes the process of learning through dialogue instead of winning through debate: "Aware of the suffering caused by rigidly held concepts, we recognize that the views we now hold will change; we will not bind ourselves to them. We seek to learn throughout our lives and to practice nonattachment from views in order to receive the insights and experiences offered by others."

For these Buddhists, it is vital to recognize that the primary purpose of conversing with others is not to win an argument but to learn and grow spiritually. It is an ongoing give-and-take process out of which human understanding of the truth organically evolves. Openness to change is a vital part of fruitful dialogue. Nobody has a monopoly on the truth, and humility is necessary both to personal enlightenment and to compassionate communication.



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possible to find ways to structure and participate in argument in such a manner that both civility and commitment get honored.

II. Covenants of Conversation

THOSE WHO PARTICIPATE:

1. *Pledge to act and speak with integrity and to regard others as doing so.*

Members of all faith communities regard their religions as being grounded in integrity and demanding integrity when their adherents speak or act. Many have difficulty, however, understanding that those outside their faith possess and represent the same kind of integrity. In the heat of controversy, it is easy for belligerents to forget their grounding in order to score points or gain favor, or to fail to discern the marks of integrity among those who disagree deeply with them. Nonetheless, it is possible to establish ground rules and modes of understanding that can help all to manifest integrity and mutual respect. The result of following or acting upon these will not mean that contenders must avoid delicate or explosive topics or that there will always be satisfying agreements or an emerging consensus. But communication need not break down and the process of addressing social issues for human good can continue even in such circumstances.

2. *Articulate express their faith.*

Interreligious dialogue has acquired a bad name in many circles because some perceive it as being based on mere tolerance; as valuing only faint commitments; as being cherished by those who say, in effect, "since

I don't believe in very much and if I can get you not to believe in very much, we can tolerate each other." Yet religious participants in civil discourse can begin on very different terms. Such participants may have such deep convictions, particular ways of expressing them, and passionate impulses to represent them, that they might be tempted to distance, dismiss, and despise all who do not agree with them. But after self-examination, they enter the dialogue with a commitment to resist such a temptation. They may use the understanding they have of the depth of their own convictions and the difficulty they would have disregarding these as a warrant to regard others as acting out of similarly profound commitments and with similar regard for their carefully worked out positions and forms of action.

3. *Act respectfully in the face of nonreligious knowledge because of religious limits.*

Among many reasons why religious voices are unwelcome or incomprehensible in many forums are these: First, people who act upon what they grasp as divine revelation in their scriptures, revelatory disclosures in their own experience, or creedal expressions, have often disregarded forms of knowledge based in reason, science, and critical inquiry. Yet serious representatives of almost all religious traditions are rediscovering that their faith does *not* demand that they turn their backs on discoveries and contentions external to religious revelation. In the new conversations they will more readily integrate the results of such discoveries.

Second, the very strengths that make religious faith attractive—a sense of ultimate meaning and a strong connection to a community of believers—have often led adherents to cover up or disregard the failures of their own traditions. In the perspective of his-



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tory, many of these appear as misfortunes, follies, and terrors, even by those who come later in the tradition. Believers have typically had no difficulty becoming aware of the limitations and errors of those in other religions, and of reminding them of such flaws. Those who are learning from history and self-examination are coming to understand that they do best at representing their faith and contributing to human good when they acknowledge past failures and present limits. Against this background of fundamental humility, the best in each believer's tradition can stand out and be grasped by others.

4. Speak to failures and mistakes of one's co-believers.

People of faith are not perfect. In seeking to give voice to their traditions, some will misstate or misinterpret those traditions or may otherwise violate principles within their tradition which should be guiding them in their civil discourse. In such situations, it is the special duty of others within that tradition to speak out against such misinterpretations. Silence allows errors free reign, while dialogue encourages learning both within and outside of the participant's tradition.

III. Engaging The Other

THOSE WHO PARTICIPATE:

1. Make efforts to engage on a personal level.

One fundamental purpose of interreligious dialogue, conversation and argument, and of civil discourse in general, is to create situations that bring people together. While carrying the risk of stimulating negative emo-

WARRANTS FOR CIVILITY: PRINCIPLE 1.3



Realize and teach that profound social issues have religious dimensions

The very notion that there are secular concerns on the one hand and religious concerns on the other, the idea that there is a dichotomy between the spirit and the world, strikes many Muslims as preposterous. The Qur'an is sprinkled with reminders of Allah's all-encompassing power: "Truly, God is powerful over everything" (2:20) and "Fear you God; surely God is witness of everything" (33:55).

According to Samaa Ellbyari, a longtime Islamic activist in Canada who participated in the Park Ridge Center project on civil discourse, the idea that social issues have religious dimensions is simply a part of the Islamic view that everything has religious dimensions. Any distinction between lay concerns and religious concerns is a modern Western notion.

According to Ellbyari, "A Muslim is supposed to be a religious person, and you're supposed to be that way during everything you do. You should remember that you are a Muslim and that you're acting according to Islamic principles. Then there's no place for religious people to go and seclude themselves and be called religious and leave that in the closet. If someone becomes a Muslim, and says, 'I'm a lay person or I'm a lay Muslim,' we laugh at them, because we think that it is incongruous to say, 'I'm a lay person.' It doesn't have meaning. Although we understand what it means in English, it should not be so."



To Speak and Be Heard

Against a background of fundamental humility, the best in each believer's tradition can stand out and be grasped by others.

tions, open give and take on a face-to-face level frequently helps people understand each other better than when they harden their positions in print or in other "frozen" forms of communication. Making a conscious effort to understand what the people on the other side of the table believe and why they believe it, figuring out what other participants regard as negotiable and what to do with the non-negotiables, becoming informed about other traditions and the reasons behind characteristic practices: all these can be done at no expense to one's own convictions. Getting to know the person with whom one is in dialogue *as a person* can facilitate the process of productive dialogue.

2. Tell stories.

To speak as we do of conversation and argument may create the impression that participants in civil discourse have to resort to propositions, debate on the basis of "secular rationality," and high levels of abstraction. But many elements of the human experience become most vivid when cast in the form of narrative. As people tell their stories and hear those of others, as the abstract is turned into flesh and blood, and the impersonal into the personal—which tends to be the case when we tell and hear stories—there can also be an increase in empathy. Surprising new agreements can emerge, agreements that might not have been reached had the human element been relegated to the background.

3. Act on the basis of relative and partial agreements.

Instead of expecting consensus, participants in emergent forms of civil discourse recognize that disagreement may be more common.

Operating on the assumption that particular points of discord overshadow areas of shared concern, some have despaired of finding ways to engage in any kind of common action. In moral and ethical discourse it is possible for people of conviction to find common ground. Just as in diplomacy, nations often engage in common activity—e.g., alliances in times of war, interdependent resolutions in the global economy, or commitments to address environmental concerns—without resolving basic disagreements. They do this most readily when they seek strategies for dealing with issues of mutual concern or with problems that no single faith community and no single element within each can resolve.

4. Listen to the voices of those previously excluded.

Characteristically in the past, the only participants in the public discourse have tended to be those privileged by official designation, academic achievement, social status, and the like. While it is difficult, and may be presumptuous, to intervene in other faith communities and try to dictate who should speak for them, it is possible to assure that a variety of voices from within one's own will be represented. We speak particularly of those who have been on the margins of society and community, as well those who can give expression to the concerns of those who have been oppressed. Such efforts can serve as an incentive to those who represent other



To Speak and Be Heard

communities to bring to the forum a variety of voices. Including voices of internal dissent at public forums can facilitate the quest for common understanding across faith boundaries and contribute to a richer discussion. In these ways, the various religions can help each other be more accountable, and to bring forth the best in their own resources.

5. *Put words into action.*

Conferences on social issues that promote human good have a bad reputation for being merely that: conferences, talking sessions. Those who believe in the power of conversation and argument will never be content to think of all this as being “merely” talk. But they are coming to recognize that the test of their talk will continue to be a response to the questions: How well do the participants and their communities put into action their agreements? How do they use their continuing disagreements to motivate other action, for the well-being of the larger human community?

IV. Living with Conflict During and After Conversation and Argument

THOSE WHO PARTICIPATE:

1. *Recognize that conflict is inevitable and can be creative.*

It is unrealistic, utopian, and ultimately destructive to imagine that, during and after the discourse that aspires to be civil, the conflict that prompted it will disappear and everyone affected will live with consensus and in harmony. In fact, new kinds of con-

WARRANTS FOR CIVILITY: PRINCIPLE 2.2



Articulate express their faith

When people of faith enter the public square, they don't have to water down or compromise their religiously grounded beliefs. In fact, it is incumbent upon them to express their particular spiritual wisdom in order to allow other participants in civil discourse to understand how the believer arrives at his or her public policy positions.

Jewish theologian Eugene B. Borowitz acknowledges the widespread fear of explicitly stating religious beliefs, yet argues that when people of faith engage in civil discourse, religious language is unavoidable. In his article “When Theologians Engage in Interfaith Dialogue,” Borowitz points out that believers “know their primary responsibility is to God and that they and their ideas are continually subject to God's judgment. As people of integrity they can respond to others only as their faith allows them to do. When someone suggests that Judaism has a lack, I do not, out of my own insecurity, rush to satisfy my dialogue partner. I also do not bristle at the possibility that someone else may know a spiritual truth my community has not thought of or has given too little emphasis. Rather, I evaluate whether there is a Jewish merit in the suggestion. My standard will be the truth on which I stand as a member of my religious community and on which I stake my life. As I see it, then, the effect of my heritage remains dominant, assimilating to it the influences arising from dialogue.”



To Speak and Be Heard

flict are likely to surface as people honestly express themselves. At the same time, veteran participants can testify to what is also clear from experience and history: that conflict can be turned toward positive ends. Conflict in many circumstances stimulates imagination, inspires adventure, leads to experiment, and promotes challenge. All these are needed as individuals and their communities address plaguing issues having to do with human rights, sexuality, family planning, and life and death issues.

2. Take steps to assure that the conversation moves beyond conflict or stalemate.

The same religious traditions and communities that, in pursuit of a narrow vision of truth and justice, can lead their adherents to repression and aggression, also project more broadly encompassing visions of reconciliation, peace, and justice. They may use different vocabularies for projecting such futures, and will not always understand the languages or motivations of others who are similarly committed. They must enter conversations pledged not to break them off in frustration or rage but to continue to participate “no matter what.” If they resolve to act on the basis of partial agreements where they reach these, if they learn when to “agree to disagree” in order to clear the agenda for work on areas where some agreement is possible, common action can result. Following these principles, they will demonstrate to the world that religious voices and communities not only have a right to a place in the public forum, they also have resources that might otherwise have been overlooked, and they speak out of and to depths of the human condition untapped by secular perspectives, and thus have something positive to bring to public life.

3. Inventory the religious resources and bring them forth.

In an era when many believe they must deal across cultural, religious, and national boundaries only on the basis of what might be called “secular rationality,” participants of faith will find reason to engage also in *ressourcement*, or reaching into their own sources of moral commitment and then presenting them in the public square. While it is important for all participants to acknowledge the valid contributions of rational discourse, it is equally important to explore other forms of expression that go into decision-making, forms that religions are in a privileged position to sustain. These include story, intuition, memory, community, tradition, affection—and hope. Creative use of each of these, most of them neglected in public debate, will help civilize civil discourse, refine argument and its outcomes, and keep the conversation going, from places and times of dissension in local communities through national forums to future global ventures, future Caïros. The price of the alternative is expensive—if not devastating—to all people on a crowded globe, in which weapons are cheap, terrorism is always a potential, and frustration and rage keep people from confronting problems that cannot wait but represent issues that need a response here and now.

V. The Hope of Civil Discourse

All life is meeting. That is the starting point for discovery, the prompter of conversation, the understanding that promotes change among humans. People of profound commitment who feared that meeting the “other” face to face might lead them to lose



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their convictions, instead have found a deepening of their own faith and philosophy. By hearing the other, they also grow, and this growth includes the readiness to pursue the common good in imaginative

ways. In the end, as in the beginning, conversation among people who disagree is the most promising approach when people address the troubling yet potentially creative issues of our time.

WARRANTS FOR CIVILITY: PRINCIPLE 4.1



Recognize that conflict is inevitable and can be creative

With the peace churches' long tradition of non-violence as a foundation, the Mennonite Conciliation Service set out in the 1970s to create a training manual for conflict resolution in local communities. That manual, and the workshops MCS offers, help individuals and groups facing political and religious discord to move through times of disagreement with mutual respect and dignity. Mennonites see conflict resolution as a response to the call to be peacemakers, following their interpretation of the life of Jesus as a pacifist.

One of the first principles of the Mennonite philosophy on civil discourse is that "Conflict is a normal part of life for all people, in and out of the church." For theological backing, MCS points to specific parts of the Bible, including the first Genesis creation account, in which, according to the manual, "God created very diverse

humans who have the freedom of choice and the power to be co-creators, all of which produce conflict." In addition, a variety of New Testament passages show both Jesus and St. Paul settling disagreements and teaching lessons that arise from those disputes.

Not only is conflict a natural part of worldly existence, it is "the arena for God's revelation. It is the venue for learning, growth and change," according to the manual. Examples of discord bearing the fruit of God's wisdom abound in nearly every book of the Bible, including a long narrative of conflict resolution in the early church related in Acts 15, in which the apostles decide that newly converted Gentiles need not be circumcised. The Mennonites read this story as one in which a "fundamental truth emerged about inclusivity in the kingdom" of God.



To Speak and Be Heard

Guidelines for Structuring Public Policy Discourse Involving Diverse People of Faith



PREAMBLE

In any effort to address important, value-laden social issues, religion can be a powerful contributor to the common good, or an equally powerful obstacle to that good. In either case, where important moral and religious values are at stake, religions will not simply go away. Because they provide and nourish most humans' fundamental understanding of themselves and their world, religions are quite simply a reality that cannot be ignored and that must be incorporated within the

process of policy deliberation and formulation. If they are not, political leaders and organizers risk believers' apathy or antipathy, both of which must be avoided if true civil discourse is to take place. Constructive religious participation in public dialogue requires a certain understanding of religious needs and characteristics, an understanding that may be furthered by the following guidelines for organizers of conferences and other public forums who recognize the need to include religious voices.

1. Allow adequate time for conversation.

In almost all religious traditions, decision-making within the tradition involves a long process of consensus-building among its members. Even the most hierarchical religious institutions consult with a wide range

of leaders and lay people not only to arrive at a decision, but also to assure that the decision, once adopted, will be understood and supported. Therefore, except where a particular issue clearly falls within an existing policy position held by a religious organization, conference organizers need to allow religious groups sufficient time to work on



Guidelines for Structuring Public Policy Discourse

the subject within their community as well as to participate in public discussions of the topic before being required to articulate a clear and final position.

2. Create an atmosphere conducive to the cultivation of trust.

In recent years, religious and secular groups and individuals have often become extremely suspicious of each others' motives and actions. While understandable, and unfortunately well justified in many instances, such distrust may preclude constructive civil discourse. All participants in public discourse should help structure dialogue to encourage honest and open relationships. Organizers should design meetings to incorporate social functions in which participants can get to know each other as people. Moreover, because many religious groups have closed themselves off from the outside, organizers should try to reach out to these groups in order to create an atmosphere welcoming to all.

3. Include a wide variety of faith traditions.

Organizers should not think of including religious voices as simply including representatives of large religious groups as a game of necessary numbers. Incorporating a diversity of religious groups opens up the discussion to a wide variety of ideas and arguments in the same way that secular political discourse is enhanced by a robust diversity of opinions and arguments.

4. Recognize that religious traditions are multivocal.

Religious traditions do not find their complete expression in any one discourse or insti-

tutional structure. Each religion is a historical and cultural construct flowing from many streams of thought and speaking with many voices. To unduly privilege any single voice is untrue to that tradition and limits the discourse involving that tradition. This means that organizers need to seek out a variety of voices within each tradition.

5. Engage religious participants as equal partners in public dialogue.

In seeking to develop policy in controversial areas of social concern, organizers of public conferences need to engage religious groups as full partners in the process of creating and developing the policies that they may be called upon to support or implement.

6. The particular value- and meaning-laden languages with which religions speak must be honored.

Although it is the necessary tool that underlies all discourse, language often throws up obstacles to effective communication. People of faith speak a particular language that is laden with values and meanings, and organizers should take great care lest concepts drafted in secular language unintentionally intrude upon or efface those meanings and values. Just as casual conversation partners who speak different tongues must translate their respective languages, so too, conference organizers should be sensitive to the need to translate secular and religious language to make it meaningful to each type of audience. No one should expect believers to surrender their religious language and adopt a strictly secular mode of communication. To require this would fail to honor and respect religions as equal participants and risk continued misunderstandings.



7. Incorporating religious voices in public dialogue requires an awareness that religions often speak in terms of norms, secular groups in terms of practice.

Frequently, misunderstandings between religious and secular speakers arise because believers often communicate in terms of norms (that is, what is right or good), while secular speakers talk in terms of practice or process. In civil discourse between these groups, organizers must help participants distinguish between these two ways of speaking.

8. Multiple forums for discourse facilitate religious participation.

Because of the difficulty of carrying on civil discourse involving multiple religious and secular groups, organizers can facilitate the conversation by allowing for differing types of forums as a part of a coordinated pattern of discussion. It is appropriate and desirable to hold inter-religious forums hosted by religious groups as well as general forums involving both religious and secular groups. Such dialogues may facilitate the development of trust among religious partic-

ipants, encourage the participation of religious groups distrustful of secular groups, and bring to the fore religious voices that might otherwise be lost or made confusing by attempts to encompass them within a single secular discourse.

9. Consider private conversations as part of constructive public discourse.

Mass media, while vitally important as a means of educating the public, can hinder constructive civil discourse. The media's tendency to structure public discourse as a contest and to offer instant interpretations of events can preclude genuine dialogue for a variety of reasons. First, potential participants in public forums may be inhibited or even scared off completely because they fear that their appearance on a panel with an ideological opponent might be misinterpreted as agreement with the opponent's point of view. Second, outside observers may misconstrue attempts to find common ground as capitulation on issues of importance to participants' constituencies. Because of the dangers arising out of the public nature of these events, private discussions among participants may ultimately advance civil discourse.



Putting the Principles to Work



BY DAVID E. GUINN

The two principal documents contained in this publication, *To Speak and Be Heard: Principles of Religious Civil Discourse* and *Guidelines for Structuring Public Policy Discourse Involving Diverse People of Faith* are intended to be largely self explanatory. Nonetheless, it may be helpful to highlight certain important features, both about the ideas incorporated in the principles and guidelines, and certain assumptions which underlie their use. It may also be helpful to provide some examples of how they can be practically implemented.

The Nature of a Religious Civil Discourse

In developing this research, the challenge was not simply to analyze the way people of faith had participated in public discourse in such forums as the International Conference

on Population and Development at Cairo in 1994 and the International Conference on Women at Beijing in 1995. It was also to explore whether religion offered guidance on how public discourse could be improved. At the simplest level, religious participants have been criticized for adopting tactics of discourse that many find offensive and that create great anger and animosity. They have engaged in the same type of mud slinging incivility that typifies secular American politics.

At a more fundamental level, religious groups have been accused of adopting tactics of obstruction and resistance. Instead of seeking to advance the public conversation, they attempt to stop it to focus solely upon specific issues of concern to their adherents. The most explosive example of this is the abortion issue. Again, people of faith are not unique in adopting these types of tactics; they are equally prevalent among secular interest groups.



Putting the Principles to Work

If properly adhered to, these principles and guidelines identify a way to restructure public discourse in a manner that will facilitate the discussion of controversial issues and contribute to the development of constructive ways to address those issues in a social context.

The question in both cases is whether or not religions offer guidance as to how to address these complaints. The principles and guidelines answer these questions in the affirmative. At a minimum, they identify a number of principles which would obligate people of faith to treat the people with whom they are in conversation with honor and respect. One cannot, for example, be honestly open to a diversity of opinions and regard others as speaking with integrity and, at the same time, engage in personal, abusive attacks of those same people. These principles urge all people of faith to adopt a style of public discourse that is civil in how all participants treat each other.

The idea of civil discourse has a second meaning. Here “civil” refers to issues of social concern, while the term “discourse” identifies a type of public conversation on these topics which is intended to result in agreements as to how to politically or communally address them. If properly adhered to, these principles and guidelines identify a way to restructure public discourse in a manner that will facilitate the discussion of controversial issues and contribute to the development of constructive ways to address those issues in a social context.

This is not to suggest that this is the only

way in which to carry on a public conversation. Nor will strategies for participation in public conversations always follow the pattern identified here. While public conversations should always be civil—in the first, normative sense—there are times when faith mandates religious resistance to certain social efforts or realities. People of faith can never be a party to discourse that is intended to result in genocide or slavery, to pick only the two most egregious examples. However, such conversations are extraordinarily rare.

More commonly, public discourse will engage a wide range of issues. While this discourse may touch upon topics which people of faith will feel compelled to resist, there will also be many opportunities to address issues on which people of faith have much to contribute. Illustrating this point are the two most popularly recognized examples of religiously based movements of social resistance of the 20th century: the Civil Rights movement in the United States led by Martin Luther King, and the Indian Independence movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. Both movements were civil in the first sense of treating their opponents with honor and respect. At the same time, they were obstructionist in the sense that certain governmental policies were deemed absolutely wrong and were resisted through non-violent means. Nonetheless, in both movements there was always a simultaneous recognition that there were many areas in which negotiation could help, and leaders in both movements were open to and participated in many such conversations. The ideas in these documents are intended to facilitate this approach to public discourse.

In practice, this means that the principles and guidelines may not—and probably will not—result in agreement on all of the issues



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under consideration. What they can do is provide a way of addressing a broad range of social issues that may cluster around individual topics of great controversy, and assist in resolving some of them while allowing for continuing disagreement over others.

The Process of Civil Discourse

As set out in the principles and guidelines, civil discourse is understood as a process which grows out of a particular community working towards advancing public conversation while at the same time maintaining and affirming that community. While the religious practices out of which these principles have emerged were originally predicated upon a strongly cohesive understanding of community, they are also applicable to a much more inclusive, contextual type of community. Each principle is laid out as an incremental step in the process. The participants first identify themselves as members of a community and then pursue a path of conversation which regularly affirms what they have in common as well as what they differ upon. While never viewing this conversation as reaching a final end, society will inevitably always be found wanting, it is a conversation which is attempting to build an edifice to serve our common needs brick by brick. To build the edifice requires not only agreement upon each individual brick but a continuing affirmation of working toward a common goal.

At the outset, the first challenge to this model of civil discourse is finding a way to establish a strong enough sense of community. It has been observed that we live in an age of suspicion and isolation. For many, battle lines

have been drawn that are not easily crossed. Indeed, one of the greatest challenges to civil discourse may be finding a way to get all of the parties to agree to talk to each other. In a world in which perception is an important tool of conversation, for some to be seen in the company of "the enemy" will be of great concern.

In the research on this project, we at the Park Ridge Center found it extremely difficult to engage representatives commonly identified as religious "conservatives" or those belonging to the orthodox communities. There were many questions about what the research was about, who would be participating, and what type of an organization the Center was. For some, the mere assertion that we were an interfaith, nondenominational, non-advocacy research center placed us in the suspect "liberal" camp. ✓ Undoubtedly, had we been a research center for explicitly "conservative" religious interests we would have encountered similar problems in engaging "liberal" participants, many of whom asked similar questions about the Center but were, however, more satisfied with the answers we were able to give.

To address this problem, it is not

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Putting the Principles to Work

Disagreement is not inherently bad. It is through disagreement that we are able to discover the weaknesses in our own understandings and hopefully achieve a creative new solution to the source of disagreement.

enough to seek the assistance of a so-called neutral host. In most situations, most people recognize that there are no neutral or value-free positions; neutrality is itself a value judgment. Moreover, any institution, whether it's the United Nations, an individual nation-state, or a non-governmental organization, will carry with it a history that many will interpret as potentially representative of particular positions. Therefore, the guidelines accept that facilitating civil discourse may be engaged in by a variety of different groups and organizations, and they attempt to outline a number of ways to engage religious groups at both ends of the political spectrum.

First, the guidelines recognize that at times public conversation may require private talks between parties at the extreme edges of the controversy. They advocate the need to actively welcome participation of all possible viewpoints to avoid the perception that the discussion is being stacked in favor of one position or another. Finally, as a practical matter, it may be necessary to develop the group of participants through a network of personal relationships. Starting with individuals who are at the political center and are willing to participate, organizers can call upon those individuals to help engage others that they know who are closer to the political extremes. By moving incrementally from the center to each extreme, it may be possible to

engage honest representation from both extremes based upon the personal trust of those already engaged in the process. This process is time-consuming but very important.

Yet even when organizers get past the hurdle of the recalcitrant participant, they are still left with the problem that many will fail to perceive themselves as part of a community. They will see themselves as isolated contestants or members of factions

fighting to win in the competition over particular issues. They will see only differences focused on topics of controversy. After all, in what way can a leader of the National Organization for Women and a leader of the Christian Coalition be said to belong to the same community? While they may intellectually acknowledge that they are part of the same political community—if they ever happen to reflect on it—they will not feel this membership in a tangible way. As noted by Stephen Carter, we have lost our sense of a shared moral understanding that helped shape and support our public conversation in the past. The loss of that sense has contributed mightily to our increasing incivility.

It is, in part, in order to establish this sense of community that the principles stress the need for establishing personal connections and relationships. For example, during the research on this project, we started our meetings with each new group of participants first by sharing a meal together, then by taking the time to go around the room and ask each participant not only to give their name but also to tell something about themselves and how they became involved in social action. We continued to support this throughout the meeting process by scheduling additional times to share meals and socialize. We avoided the danger that participants might view each other as the abstract "enemy" by repeatedly bringing them

yes, we could do better in public speaking but...



together to see each other as fellow human beings and collaborators in our work.

The Divisiveness of Disagreement

While overcoming suspicions at the start of a public conversation is difficult, the argumentative nature of much public discourse is equally problematic. Disagreement is not inherently bad. It is through disagreement that we are able to discover the weaknesses in our own understandings and hopefully achieve a creative new solution to the source of disagreement. The difficulty is that focusing exclusively upon disagreement emphasizes difference and distracts from the grounding of community necessary for effective common action.

To avoid this divisive tendency, the principles and guidelines focus attention on a process of dialogue that moves forward through a series of smaller steps of consensus-building. For example, they could be used to facilitate discussion about reproductive health where the effort is to avoid the need for abortion by attempting to confront the problem of teen pregnancy or by seeking to alter social forces, such as economic issues, that may be contributing to abortion. By seeking out and reaffirming common views and by addressing the areas where consensus can be more readily addressed, the process of discourse consistently builds and sustains the group's sense of community and slowly, positively, advances the discussion to achieve concrete results. While the discourse may not be able to resolve all of the issues of contention, it does facilitate resolving those that can be resolved rather than allowing them to get lost in the conflict over the more

intractable disagreements. Moreover, by building a strong sense of community and good will, organizers and participants may find solutions to even the most difficult problems.

In the course of the discussion, there may be a tendency for participants to fall back into the more popular patterns of debate based upon argument. This tendency is particularly common where the conversation is allowed to adopt strictly abstract terms of value and principles. In our research, a conversation on homosexuality carried on in terms of abstract norms and scriptural proscriptions was found to inhibit the participation of some members of the discussion group. The discussion was alienating and destructive to the sense of community. To address this, the principles and guidelines suggest that this type of conversation be carried forward with stories and personal narratives. Constantly seek to maintain a sense of community that will facilitate participation, as opposed to pushing the conversation towards antagonism and resistance.

Can They Have an Effect?

The process of civil discourse identified in the principles and guidelines can only be

While the discourse may not be able to resolve all issues of contention, it does facilitate resolving those that can be resolved rather than allowing them to get lost in the conflict over the more intractable disagreements.



effective if they are consciously adopted and used by people of faith. The principles in *To Listen And Learn* cannot be implemented in isolation. All sides to a conversation must agree to be bound by them and to work with them. Policy makers who are interested in finding ways to work with people of faith can adopt the suggestions of the guidelines only

if people of faith are willing to bind themselves to the principles set forth in *To Listen And Learn*. Given the tensions and acrimony in the world which many believe are increasingly inhibiting our ability to address important issues of social concern, all parties have a great incentive for change. This is their opportunity.



Putting the Principles to Work

**THE OPINIONS EXPRESSED IN THIS REPORT ARE THOSE OF THE AUTHORS AND DO NOT
NECESSARILY REFLECT THE VIEWS OF THE PEW CHARITABLE TRUSTS.**

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“ While religious leaders through the centuries have often insisted on monopolies and resorted to using civil powers to enforce their views, people of faith have just as often used that faith to resist false authority, bad law, and social injustice imposed by equally ideological, secularly led forces. In any case, the voices of conscience, morality, justice, mercy, and ethics are too blended and too dependent upon each other to be silenced now. ”

— *Martin E. Marty*
From the Introduction