

An exercise in civility: To speak and be heard

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [January 27, 1999](#) issue

Here is a nightmare for those who hate Conflict: take a not very large or airy room in Washington, D.C., and jam it full of tables and microphones, chairs and cameras. Put a document on the table to test at a "public airing." Now invite to the table representatives of groups who are rarely in the same room together. Tell these antagonists that you would like them to talk about four issues that divide Americans, especially religious Americans: reproductive rights (which, to no one's surprise, quickly gets reduced to abortion); the rights of homosexuals; world population; and church and state.

Ordinarily one would want quickly to wake up from such a nightmare. But at a recent meeting sponsored by a group of scholars from Chicago's Park Ridge Center for the Study of Health, Faith and Ethics, the company was intelligent, interesting and at times even playful enough to assure a good day. People were disarmed by the very act of accepting the invitation to attend, a fact that their hosts kept in mind by offering an implicit covenant not to exploit them should they choose to be open and vulnerable. In their ordinary state, these people belong to coalitions, as in the Christian Coalition, or in alliances, as in the Interfaith Alliance, from which they stare across the no-man's land between trenches, or march ahead to vanquish the foe--or at least to lobby for their own cause.

Whoever has seen such partisans frighten away moderates from a school board or preempt a precinct meeting knows why we were afraid our gathering might become a nightmare. The Park Ridge Center was trying out a new document, *To Speak and Be Heard: Principles of Religious Discourse*, on these frequent antagonists. Working with a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts, we--especially colleagues David Guinn and Larry Greenfield--had spent many days on the road and at the conference table in order to prepare the document.

Participating were leaders from the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholics for a Free Choice, National Association of Evangelicals, National Council of Churches, Family Research Council, People for the American Way, Heritage Foundation, Human Rights Campaign, Ethics and Public Policy Center, Religious

Coalition for Reproductive Choice, Christian Legal Society, Interfaith Alliance, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, First Amendment Center of Freedom Forum, and spokespersons for various agencies concerned with population and "reproductive choice."

Though inviting leaders of these diverse organizations into a small space might have looked like planning a religiopolitical version of the Jerry Springer television show, the intention was just the opposite. If the "principles and guidelines" of our document worked here, it could signal a better way to handle conflict. That better way could not require debaters to leave their convictions, passions and intensities at the door. It could not make tolerance the highest virtue or ask that relativism rule. Only a utopian would expect participants to resolve in a couple of hours what wise people have not accomplished in decades or centuries.

Some among those who attended the meeting were battle-scarred veterans of the controversial 1994 International Conference on Population and Development at Cairo, where informal alliances between the Vatican and hardline Muslim groups had dominated the debate on reproductive rights and overpopulation. To some that conference had been a disaster, and they wanted to learn why things had gone so wrong. Their antagonists, also represented at the Washington table, had walked away triumphant and were spoiling for the next round of battle at a future, second such Cairo event. Would they now, in the carefully-thought-out circumstances of our Washington meeting, be able to speak frankly with one another, showing how their positions were based on profound religious convictions? Would they be able to hear voices they usually outshout or block? They would, could and did.

None of the participants needed prodding. Many are old pros at representing their causes; some knew their opponents well and are civil enough to have coffee together before or after their contentious encounters. But being seasoned spokespeople for their positions tends to make people even more committed than the rank and file, and to have more at stake than others in the outcomes of arguments and conversations.

What the organizers hope will come from efforts like these include at least the following: helping to keep the republic healthy; restoring public confidence that religion--at the root of the most volatile causes but often excluded from discussion--really belongs in the public debate; helping contending groups to keep their searches and conversations going as they seek various levels of common ground

and revise agendas to promote causes on which they come to some consensus; developing personal relations among those too often isolated from each other.

The word "civility" has come into favor because it refers both to the civil order and to polite behavior. So many groups are studying and encouraging civility that trendspotters have begun to yawn. Some backlashers have begun to call for more incivility, as if the world were becoming too civil. Yet how much we need civility to guide discourse on issues that threaten the very core of community and efforts to improve the world.

Some of the most moving exchanges at our meeting came when prolife people tried to explain why they cry over daily deaths-by-abortion, and prochoice people looked into the eyes of their opponents--and, yes, they were and are opponents--and gave voice to the agonies of women who must make desperate choices. The exchanges between representatives of homosexual rights and those who, adhering to their conscience, see homosexual activity as against scriptures, natural law and the good of the country all but threatened the peace of the occasion. But no one left the table, and we are confident that we were all changed by the experience.

Some of the polarized parties arranged to have face-to-face meetings the next day at which they would listen to each other as if for the first time. They could continue to learn what offends each other and to respect each other as persons.

The guideline that evoked the most discussion was a "covenant of conversation."

Those who participate . . . 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. . . . 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 circumstance.

All who spoke confessed that they strove to have and to manifest integrity, and most confessed that they had difficulty believing their antagonists had or showed it. But it was clear that participants made advances in understanding on this point; communication did not break down, and "the process of addressing social issues for human good" was refreshed.

Once again we learned that the troubling disputes in our republic are grounded in vastly differing worldviews and responses to texts and leaders; we learned that people cannot and will not lightly give up their stands. Their whole lives are wrapped up in them. Their jobs of representation are not mere jobs; they are ways of life that others have trouble understanding.

Some suggested that help is needed to implement such conversations in local communities. Others voiced frustration that the network of people in religious groups and communities who regularly work at "civil discourse" is alarmingly small and weak. Some cautioned that people of power can use the concepts of civil discourse and civility to manipulate processes and people. But the same voices expressed the conviction that the faith traditions also have often-unplumbed resources for helping people both to love the truth and to speak the truth in love.