

# A nice gesture

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [April 14, 1999](#) issue

Frederick Denny's article on "Postures and Gestures" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* may contribute to your survival in our uncivil society. Denny says there are religious gestures that communicate "adoration, affirmation, blessing, consecration, curse, gratitude, greeting, humility, invocation, meditation, mourning, oath taking, penitence, pleading, praise, prayer, protection, remorse, reverence, sorrow, and submission."

Where are these relevant outside of houses of worship? On traffic-clotted streets that induce road rage. John Tierney, in "Inventing a Hand Signal to Offset the Classic Gesture of Road Rage" (in the *New York Times*), reports on the need for gentler gestures. So contagious is road rage that I suspect that when an Amish buggy driver cuts off another Amish buggy, he'll see a familiar threatening gesture.

"Now that civility is coming back into fashion, New Yorkers could use a new signal," Tierney says. Traffic engineer Samuel I. Schwartz has suggestions. He tried the peace sign, flashing two fingers in a "V," but some resented its political connotations. Other drivers saw only one finger and got really mad. So Schwartz tried tapping a finger to his forehead, as if to say, "How thoughtless of me! I'm sorry!"

David Givens of Spokane, an expert on nonverbal communication, says the head-tapping gesture doesn't translate well into all cultures. In some places it means "I'm crazy"--so who would want to be on the road with you? In France, it means you think your companion is stubborn.

Givens has invented the Bowing Thumb Waggle. Earlier reptilian life forms bowed to show their submission. Feel meek or friendly and your old reptilian brain circuits will lead you, in any culture, to shrug your shoulders, turn your palms up and show submission. You show that you are helpless, contrite.

Givens adapts that move in his new friendly gesture. Display your open palm and wave gently with your fingers spread and your thumb folded across your palm. "I

mean no harm," says that open palm and poor thumbless hand. You've apologized. You're home free in the fast lane.

The problem is, it takes one hand off the wheel, perhaps at a crucial moment. Here is where Denny helps. Why not call on the reconciling power of religious faith? You cut someone off on the road. Quickly scan her/his face. Does the enraged one look Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu or Christian? Religion ought to be of help in a crisis. But so often our hopes get disappointed. Religious gestures are confusing.

My instinct would be to raise my hand in blessing. Yet one set of Christians blesses with two fingers, another with three, and another with the full hand looking like a slightly pitched tent roof. Use the wrong blessing and you might evoke centuries-old Christian tribal warfare. To cut down on road rage, I suggest simply letting oneself be blessed and ecumenically accepting all Christian-crossed blessings, Jewish Aaronic benedictions or anything else that bodes well for peace on the road.

The repertory of options is large; you might try things other than hand gestures. But be careful. Denny says that ancient and modern Greek religious and magical customs call for one to spit into the eye of a close relative to "prove the absence of evil-eye intentions." Make sure she's a very close relative before trying that, even in newly civil New York.