

**FAITH, REASON AND PUBLIC LIFE:
ARE THEY COMPATIBLE?**

By Charles W. Allen

I'm trying to address two issues in this essay. First, I'm challenging our culture's current tendency to divide society up into sectors like government, business, and what we call the "voluntary sector" or sometimes "civil society." My problem with this division is that it too often encourages us to think that only certain groups have responsibility for "the common good"--whatever that might mean. I want to argue that the common good is everybody's responsibility.

The second issue I want to address is a certain hesitancy people have these days about trying to base public life on universal statements about human nature. Thinkers like Stanley Hauerwas, Ronald Thiemann and Sharon Welch tend to think this is a bad idea, or at least that's what they seem to be saying sometimes. But I just don't think we can avoid this. Granted, it's always dangerous to make universal statements about people, unless you're God. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't take the risk, and that's what I'm about to do.

My title poses a question: Are faith, reason and public life compatible? And I don't just mean compatible in the sense of not conflicting with one another when kept apart but in the lovers' sense of being able to live intimately with one another. Are they compatible in that sense?

Lots of people these days say they're not. Faith, many say, is not rational and should remain a strictly private matter. Reason, many say, is short-circuited if personal convictions or social concerns are allowed to influence its operation. And public life, many say, is a matter of winning power struggles that have nothing to do with quests for truth or confessions of faith.

Well then, should they be kept apart, or do we dare to let them engage in a threesome? I'm opting for the threesome. Put less racy, I want to argue that faith, reason and public life are so closely interrelated that we ought never to think about one of these aspects of human life apart from the other two.

Nobody can escape living by faith, that is, by specific and even peculiar truths that seem to claim us more radically than any attempt to question or

***Charles W. Allen is Affiliate Professor of Theology at Christian Theological Seminary and Manager of the Bookstore.**

justify them. Nobody can live faithfully by these truths without reasoning critically, that is, without forging an overall perspective from those truths that is coherent and adaptable enough to enable us to face the most urgent practical demands on our lives with integrity. And nobody can do any of this in complete privacy: even our most intimate activities embody and affect relationships with others who are just as peculiar as we are and without whom we could never appreciate our own peculiar ways of living in what is fast becoming a global cultural network.

These are three fairly sweeping claims--that everybody lives by faith, that to live faithfully by faith is to reflect upon it critically, and that to live by and reflect upon faith is to participate in some form of public life. I take them to be truths that describe any person at any time or place. Many people might reject this description, in which case I'm rash enough to assume, at least for the time being, that those people are wrong. Either there's something they don't understand, or they're just being stubborn.

I know of course that I could be wrong too. I have no guarantee that I won't change my own mind some day. But I can't stop living by truths as important for me as these are just because I'm fallible. I can be polite with people who disagree. I can assume that on the whole they may be just as intelligent and honest as I am, if not more so. And since I'm fallible and might learn something I should not only insist on others' right to disagree but also make time to try to understand them. But as long as I can't help living by these truths I will still in effect be implying, however subtly, that these people are wrong. And I expect no less from them.

Maybe this sounds downright uncivil. But I'm going a little out of my way to sound provocative, because I want to emphasize the potential for conflict that always attends taking one's beliefs seriously. It's precisely because there is such a potential that our so-called modern societies have often insisted on putting up barriers between faith, reason and public life. And anybody, like me, for instance, who wants to challenge those barriers had better be clear about the risks involved. It never hurts to remember the Thirty Years War.

Since the stakes are indeed high, I'm obliged to say more about what gives me the right even to make such claims as I've made, much less to keep calling them truths. Shall I appeal to faith, to critical reflection or to others' say-so? I appeal to all three, of course--that's part of my basic point.

I can be said to appeal to faith on behalf of these truths because their claim on my loyalty and trust is more radical than any arguments I could

produce to support them. I know of plenty of arguments in favor of all three of them--in fact I'm offering some loosely structured arguments for them right now. So I'm not saying that arguments are irrelevant. But the hold these claims already have on me is so radical that I would not stop living by them even if I found flaws in every argument on their behalf. For the time being I would simply keep looking for better arguments.

Despite the radicality of their claim, however, I no longer have the option of calling these truths self-evident, as our Enlightenment forebears might have done. The history of Western thought alone teaches us that even what we once took to be self-evident principles of mathematics and logic are open to fundamental revision.¹ The whole point of calling a truth self-evident was to guarantee that it couldn't change, but history seems to suggest that no truth can provide that kind of guarantee. So an element of risk remains whenever we place any trust in truths that claim us most radically. It involves something like a leap of faith.

There have been numerous philosophers who have insisted that it is a sin against reason to put any more stock in my beliefs than is permitted by the conclusiveness of the arguments produced for them.² So in their eyes I have just sinned. But these thinkers have never produced any arguments conclusive enough to justify the degree of loyalty they show for their belief. So which of us is more guilty? My position seems just a little bit superior to theirs, because it seems more consistent and more honest. I do believe that we should be committed to critically examining our beliefs at least as much as we are to living by them.³ But some beliefs we have to live by even as we examine them, and

¹See Hilary Putnam, Realism with a Human Face (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 21ff; Stephen E. Toulmin, Human Understanding (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

²This view is known as "evidentialism." For discussions and critiques of this position from several angles, see Faith and Rationality, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Rationality, Religious Belief, Moral Commitment, ed. Robert Audi and William Wainwright (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

³On this point I differ from the "Reformed epistemologists" mentioned in the preceding note. They seem to regard critical reflection as an option instead of

these seem to be just as much products of faith as of anything else.

But just as important as the radical claim these truths make on me is the fact that they are supported by others' say-so. For example, I find a degree of support for them in philosophers like Paul Ricoeur, Richard Bernstein and Hilary Putnam, and in theologians like H. Richard Niebuhr, David Tracy and William Placher.⁴ Their say-so is certainly no substitute for my own, but that does not make theirs any less decisive in the long run. Now of course I'm not talking about just anybody's judgment here. The only judgments that carry much weight will be those made by people who seem sufficiently informed about and honestly interested in the subject under consideration. I'd call such people experts, except that where our most fundamental convictions are concerned there are no people whose judgments can settle an issue the way an expert's can in, say, forensic medicine. So I'll just call them reliable people.

Nobody can specify just how many reliable people have to share a belief for me to keep taking it seriously. But it's clear that, if nobody I thought reliable ever agreed with me, I would begin to harbor strong doubts about my own reliability. Any of us would, and that's as it should be.

To rely upon the say-so of reliable others as much as my own is to rely upon a variety of intersecting communities and traditions. This is where we all have to start, since we have to be formed by our surrounding culture before we even know how to ask a question.⁵ Where my most radical convictions are at

an obligation. In support of my position I can cite no less Reformed a figure than John Calvin, in his critique of implicit faith: "It is not enough for a man implicitly to believe what he does not understand or even investigate." *Institutes*, III.2.ii.

⁴See Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), *The New Constellation* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991); Putnam, *op. cit.*; H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1941); David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987); William C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989).

⁵See Ricoeur, pp. 243-246.

stake, however, I must eventually rely upon my own say-so as much as anybody else's. That is when I begin to participate actively and critically in this complex web of relationships. It is, in effect, to take part in critical and ongoing conversations that allow for people's need to live by as well as talk about the truths that claim them most radically. And that is what I mean by public life in the fullest sense of the phrase.

At this point we can begin to see how these truths about faith, reason and public life are also the product of critical reasoning, just as they are of faith and public life. To acknowledge that even my most radical convictions rely on reliable others' say-so as much as my own is to expose them to what seem at times to be competing claims of those others' most radical convictions. What do I do when I find myself living among people who seem as reliable as I could ever hope to be, but whose most radical convictions seem to clash with mine? More importantly, what do I do when I find such an apparent clash of convictions taking place not just between me and them but between me in one context and me in another? I might, for example, find myself just as radically claimed by some current truths of post-Christian feminism as I am by some ancient truths of Christian faith. Or I may find I must be radically pro-choice about halting the development of a human embryo in its earliest stages and yet also find myself deeply moved by Jainism's resolve to avoid harming even a gnat at considerable cost to oneself.

These are the kinds of situations in which most of us so-called modern and postmodern types find ourselves today. We find ourselves participating in a variety of communities of conviction to the point where, if we're honest, we're not always sure about who or what we are anymore. But our current pluralistic situation only accelerates the inevitability of this kind of perplexity, because it turns out that not even the most tightly knit and isolated community can remain faithful to the truths that claim it most radically without eventually producing an unpredictable diversity of interpretations in response to novel situations. Even a lifetime hermit would eventually have to cope with that kind of diversity. It's impossible for historical beings like us to preserve any insight or conviction for long without adapting it from moment to moment to the point where we may well ask if there's any continuity left at all.⁶ So whether we live

⁶See Charles W. Allen, "Theological Method for Everybody," *Encounter* 52 (1991):63-80.

in so-called modern, postmodern or premodern societies, we all face the perplexing task of learning how to cope with a potentially conflicting diversity.

As I've said elsewhere, this kind of perplexity can be healthy, but not if all it does is leave us paralyzed.⁷ The only way to avoid paralysis when such apparent conflicts occur is to work at forging an overall perspective that may not remove all tensions but that at least brings enough practical coherence to our cluster of convictions to enable us to face the most urgent practical demands on our lives. And I can think of no better definition for critical reasoning than precisely this effort to make our most radical convictions practically coherent.

Most advocates for critical reasoning view some form of coherence as an essential component, but too often they define coherence only in terms of a rigidly formal consistency. That's not what I mean by practical coherence. To be practical, this kind of coherence has to be elastic rather than rigid, so that it won't minimize the genuine diversity we encounter in living from one moment to the next. It's what Aristotle was getting at when he recognized the need for practical wisdom alongside more abstract and formal ways of reasoning. I've argued elsewhere that in our day we need to recognize that practical wisdom is not just one type of reasoning alongside others but the most fundamental and inclusive type that tells us when we need to resort to other, more formal and rigid types of reasoning.⁸

I can be said to appeal to this kind of reason on behalf of the claims I've made about faith, reason and public life, because I've found a way to make them practically coherent with one another as well as with any other truths that claim me just as radically. This, to be sure, has involved redefining all three of these terms to make them more compatible with each other. In particular I've redefined "reason" to the point that it no longer looks all that different from faith or public life. But I believe these adaptations preserve enough continuity with what we ordinarily mean by these terms that I can continue to stand by them, even though they are bound to provoke controversy. That's all the justification anyone can realistically hope for, and that, along with the other appeals I've made, is what entitles me to call these claims truths instead of just arbitrary

⁷*Ibid.* p.64.

⁸Charles W. Allen, "The Primacy of *Phronesis*," *Journal of Religion* 69 (1989):359-374.

opinions. Let me repeat them. I've claimed that everybody lives by faith, that to live faithfully by faith is to reflect upon it critically, and that to live by and reflect upon faith is to participate in some form of public life.

So far what I've presented sounds like a general philosophical anthropology--a description of what it is to be human regardless of one's circumstances or additional beliefs. In a way that is of course what I'm doing. I'm presenting truths that I think ought to be persuasive to any people who adequately understand what I'm saying and who are sufficiently attentive to their own situations. They don't have to become Christians to find them persuasive, nor do they first have to accept any of the so-called classics of Western Civilization.

I would be less than honest, however, if I failed to point out that these are the reflections of one kind of Christian, and that perhaps the principle motivation for developing these more generalized reflections on human life is my desire to explain why I think it reasonable and responsible for me to live by truths as peculiar as those implied by faith in something as elusive as the God of Jesus Christ. This is the God who, in Karl Barth's apt phrase, "does the general through the particular,"⁹ and only through the particular.

In abstract terms this may sound like a contradiction, but from the more concrete and elastic standpoint of practical wisdom it sounds eminently sensible. And one of the principal reasons for my attraction to a practical wisdom model of reasoning is that it helps me make a great deal of sense of much of the God-talk I've inherited. So while I seem to be presenting a philosophical anthropology, what I say about humans in general is as much the product of a peculiar heritage of faith as it is of critical reflection on human nature as such.

With this admission I am allying myself partly with the "postliberal" school of Christian theology, represented by people like George Lindbeck, William Placher and Ronald Thiemann.¹⁰ This is an increasingly diverse

⁹Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2, part 2, trans. G. W. Bromily, et al., ed. G. W. Bromily and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), p. 53.

¹⁰See George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984; Placher, *op. cit.*; Ronald F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991).

approach that recognizes--rightly, I think--that we who call ourselves Christians cannot step beyond our Christian standpoint in order to critique it from some supposedly more universal or neutral point of view. Nor, they insist, do we need to step beyond it. For the case can at least be made that even our most heroic efforts at self-criticism are themselves radically motivated and informed by our Christian convictions.

With the postliberals I have to admit that I don't know if I would be as concerned as I think I should be with truth for truth's sake, or with the plight of society's victims, if I did not consider myself somehow accountable, ultimately, to the God of Israel and of Jesus Christ. I can't step beyond such convictions as these, nor can I seriously imagine doing so, which of course is no guarantee that I won't, but it does signal that these convictions are at least as radical as any others.

But at this point I can ally myself only partly with the postliberals. I can't pretend, as they sometimes seem to, that these radical truths always come with the label "Christian" attached to them.¹¹ Honesty compels me to confess that other truths seem to claim me just as radically as the conviction that God is with us unsurpassably in Jesus Christ. And it's not always clear that these truths are easily reconcilable with that Christian confession. If we also acknowledge, as I and my postliberal colleagues do, the truth that women are as entitled to lead and name the world as men ever were, then that places a giant question mark over the patriarchal slant that seems built into so much of the God-talk and past practices of Christian faith. I'm gambling, of course, that the most radical truths of Christian faith and feminism will ultimately prove reconcilable, but I'm deeply suspicious of theologians who think the issue is already pretty much resolved. You can't just quote Galatians 3:28 or point out that this male Jesus was nice to women, and then go on your way as if feminist criticisms had been adequately answered.

I applaud the postliberals' radical confessionality about Christian truths. But because many of them seem so unperturbed by other truths, I suspect that their confessionality isn't radical enough. If it were, they would sound more perplexed. We need to start with all the truths that seem to claim us most radically, and we need to acknowledge unabashedly that we're not

¹¹For an example of this tendency, see William Willimon, "Answering Pilate," *The Christian Century* 104 (1987):308-309.

always sure how to reconcile them. That and only that is a thoroughly radical confessionalism.

Postliberals also have a tendency to assume the worst about anybody who thinks it very important to link Christian convictions to a more general philosophical anthropology, especially if it's an anthropology that, like mine, aims to be persuasive to non-Christians and non-Westerners as well as Christians. They believe that this will inevitably lead us to compromise the distinctiveness of Christianity's peculiar standpoint and to discount the distinctiveness of other standpoints as well.¹²

I share their concern, but not their assumption that this is what will inevitably happen when we generalize. It's true that our culture's prevailing models of reason emphasize universals at the expense of particulars to the point that a particular thing is treated as nothing more than a place-holder for general properties. If we followed the prevailing models, then we would in fact be forced to discount the distinctiveness of our own and anybody else's particular standpoint. But that is all the more reason why we should resist the prevailing models of reason.

The practical wisdom model of reason I'm pushing allows us to resist these prevailing models. It insists that in practice general truths and particular standpoints are in dynamic, mutually informative interaction. That makes even our most sweeping generalizations vulnerable to any number of interpretations peculiar to a specific situation to the point that any identity they retain is dependent on the kind of elastic coherence I mentioned earlier.

This model has close affinities with the postliberals' emphasis on narrative, since a narrative provides one of the most vivid examples of dynamic interaction between general truths and particular standpoints. I've learned much from the postliberals on this point, which is why I find it all the more irksome that some of them seem to forget it when they start criticizing attempts like mine or David Tracy's to offer a more generalized series of reflections. If we pay attention to what we're doing, we won't neglect or devalue particular standpoints but will actually encourage appreciation for them in all their particularity.¹³

¹²See Thiemann, p. 82.

¹³Postliberals do in fact acknowledge that a degree of generalizing is necessary, but they are reluctant to go beyond sporadic, *ad hoc* generalizations.

Of course postliberals are not the only people to have reservations about generalizing. Feminist thinkers also tend to get nervous, especially if the generalizer is a white male.¹⁴ And they're right to be nervous. I'm not pretending that generalizing isn't ever dangerous.

But I think what I've said so far lends further support to the "standpoint epistemologies" that many feminists advocate.¹⁵ And feminist critiques of contemporary culture also help me explain why the practical wisdom model of reason has never been granted a prominent role in Western culture. Beginning with Aristotle, it's always been considered inferior to more formal and rigid patterns of reasoning. And I'm not using the word "rigid" by accident. Practical wisdom's elastic use of universals was doubtless considered too limp, too yielding, and thus too stereotypically feminine to be considered more than a marginal form of reasoning.

So when I insist that we now need to bring this pattern of reasoning from the margin to the center of our thinking and acting, I'm suggesting that values and insights that men dismissed as too feminine are actually values and insights around which both men and women should lead their interconnected lives.

But I'm still generalizing. Isn't that a typically male temptation? Well, certain types of generalizing have been typically male, but I'm suggesting that a practical wisdom model offers a different, less potentially oppressive way to generalize.

The question has been asked, of course, why we need to generalize at all. To that I can only answer that we seem to have no other choice, and I draw

I see no reason to stay so disorganized, however, as long as we don't lose track of our practical, situated involvement in what we are claiming.

¹⁴See Sharon Welch, Communities of Resistance and Solidarity (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985), p. 38. Welch does, however, finally seem to acknowledge the need for universalizing moves. See pp. 74-92. But even here her wording is such that she seems to vacillate from one paragraph to the next.

¹⁵To my mind, at least, the best feminist standpoint epistemology sketched so far is Sandra Harding's The Science Question in Feminism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986). Harding in effect argues for the primacy of a practical wisdom model of reasoning in rethinking the unity of the sciences.

encouragement from thinkers like Catherine Keller, who makes that argument in her defense of feminist metaphysical thinking:

Why leap beyond particular selves to what selves have in common with everything else--especially when we are trying to avoid the pretentious claims of androcentric abstraction? Let me repeat: we do anyway, always, already. Everyone participates, however vaguely, in some conceptual network that relates one experience to the next.¹⁶

Keller likewise believes that there are more concretely engaged ways to generalize that don't involve "androcentric abstraction." "We move," she says, "through particular relations to particular things to glimpse the unseen interrelatedness of all things--and always back to the particular."¹⁷ That's as clear an expression of a practical wisdom model as I might hope for.

What I've said in defense of generalizing applies to any number of truths, but let me return once again to the three I keep mentioning: that everybody lives by faith, that to live faithfully by faith is to reflect upon it critically, and that to live by and reflect upon faith is to participate in some form of public life. Why do I keep coming back to these truths?

I'm promoting these truths in particular today because I think our world desperately needs new models of society that allow people of diverse convictions to live together in ways that take their distinctive convictions seriously. We need new models because the old ones aren't working, and besides, they're based on faulty assumptions.

Our modern models originated with the Enlightenment. They assumed that a society's public life could be regulated by formal principles of reason, apart from faith. Faith was to be kept a strictly private matter, no different from arbitrary pursuits of pleasure whose public impact would be checked by the invisible hand of unregulated market forces. So now we seem stuck with a bureaucratic state that can't function and a mechanistic market whose gears keep getting jammed. Meanwhile the various communities of conviction,

¹⁶Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), p. 156.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 158.

sometimes referred to collectively as "civil society," seem to have been stripped of any power to influence either the state or the market.¹⁸

This unworkable situation stems at least in part from mistaken views of reason and faith. As I've argued, reason can't be divorced from faith, nor faith from reason. Reason, while it does require rules, is not primarily a matter of dispassionate, bureaucratic regulation. And faith, if it's the genuine article, just won't be kept private. If you try to keep it that way, you'll only encourage a reactionary backlash.

Of course, pre-Enlightenment models for living together are no more reliable. They tried to enforce unquestioning obedience to a single authority, be it religious, political or both at once. But it's impossible to remain faithful to any authority without asking questions about its applicability to unforeseen situations, and that can eventually lead one to question its relevance to any situation. There's no honest way to suppress this.

So if Enlightenment models won't work, and if authoritarian models are no better off, where do we turn next? We still need models that, like the Enlightenment models, allow diversity while trying to minimize the physical harm we can do to one another when our convictions clash. We need models that can enforce a certain degree of toleration. But we can no longer afford to base toleration on the Enlightenment idea that members of the same society are entitled to live by their convictions only as long as they don't infringe on their neighbors' right to do the same. That idea points in the right direction, but what the Enlightenment thinkers failed to notice is that, if we're members of the same society, then my choices always to some extent limit or expand the choices you can make, and vice versa. We're always infringing on each other's right to live by our respective convictions.

So, especially in today's increasingly interconnected global society, we need to be tolerant, not to prevent infringing on each other's convictions, but to make our inevitable, mutual infringement instructive. We need tolerance so that our infringement can take the form of an ongoing critical conversation.

So for the Enlightenment principle of toleration I propose we substitute this one: I'm entitled to live by my convictions only as long as I do what I can to

¹⁸For an illuminating analysis of this situation, see Alan Wolfe, *Whose Keeper?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

remain in conversation with others who will be affected by what I do.¹⁹ That implies that everybody now desperately needs to cultivate skills for conversing critically about the convictions their lives express. Conversation on these matters is not simply a luxury for academics or other leisured cultural elites. It's everybody's responsibility.

Maybe there's no way a society can or should force people to converse without the effort backfiring. But surely more can be done than modern societies have tried to do to create conditions that encourage and reward it. Societies can try to insure that people will have the space, the time and the means to converse.²⁰ Maybe that sounds like another tax and spend proposal, but I'm convinced that the expense to us all will be far greater in the long run if we don't do something like this. And besides we need to re-think the whole relationship between states, markets and civil society's communities of conviction. These are not separate spheres that have nothing to say to one another, for all our thinking and acting reveals an intertwined network of convictions, private preferences, and assertions of power.²¹ We're going to need social structures elastic and permeable enough to encourage politicians, business people, intellectuals, true believers, and the like to remain in conversation with one another.

I know that convincing most people that they need to converse about their convictions will be an uphill struggle. Many fear that their convictions would be undermined by the exposure. But I can't think of anything more corrosive to people's convictions in a society as diverse as ours than avoiding discussion about them. For that conveys the impression that differences of conviction aren't important enough to bring up, that they're no more important than, say, preferring one flavor of ice cream over another. It involves treating

¹⁹My criticism of the Enlightenment model of toleration and my proposed alternative are both indebted to Robin W. Lovin, "Social Contract or a Public Covenant?" in Religion and American Public Life, ed. Robin W. Lovin (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), pp. 132-145.

²⁰On this point see Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, pp. 213-214.

²¹See Anthony Giddens, New Rules of Sociological Method (New York: Basic Books, 1976), p. 161.

our convictions as if they weren't really convictions after all.

People may also be reluctant to converse because they're not sure that they can fully explain why they believe as they do. But part of what I've been trying to show is that when it comes to fundamental convictions everybody's in that position, more or less. The truths that claim us most radically always seem to elude our attempts to account for their claim. If we started by admitting that, then our attempts at conversation would be far less self-conscious. For to be taken seriously in a conversation it's not necessary to be able to prove your convictions incontrovertibly. It's only necessary to show that your convictions enable you to stay in the conversation. That may not be the only reason to keep living by your convictions, but it's about as good a reason as any.

I began these reflections by asking if faith, reason and public life were compatible, and I've tried to show how these three aspects of human life are so closely interrelated that we ought never to think of one of them apart from the other two. I've been trying, that is, to change the way we typically think about these matters. But the upshot of all this is a practical agenda that involves more than just thinking. It involves fostering a multicultural global society engaged in constant conversation.²²

The place to begin furthering that agenda, however, is with the various communities of conviction and reflection that have formed us already. The Enlightenment models haven't really stripped us of all our power to influence public life, and it's high time we heard more from people of conviction who are not part of a reactionary backlash. Those of us with some training in articulating our convictions need to help friends and neighbors find ways to express their own convictions without their getting too flustered. And we need to convince them that in the long run they have less to fear from conversing about convictions than they do from keeping silent. The stakes are too high to settle for anything less.

In the meantime, we can take encouragement from knowing that some conversations are already taking place. Today's forum provides a good example. That's no reason to get too optimistic, but we can at least stay hopeful.

²²The contours of such an agenda are suggestively outlined in Anthony Giddens's model of "utopian realism." See Giddens, Consequences of Modernity (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 154-173.