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CHAPTER EIGHT

Argument, Conversation, and Story

The American struggle for the common good will advance not when citizens agree on absolutes, adopt a creed or philosophy, impose a dogma, or frame answers to all questions. Those who persist with dreams of totalism may try to impose one set of norms and attempt to coerce national community into shape, but they will fail. They lack constitutional grounds in a free society for their efforts and, should they abrogate republican polity, the inability of governments in unfree societies to impose their ideologies and then command assent suggests that such an approach would also founder here.

Left without a creed, however, citizens do find reasons to pursue the common good along with some elements of common life. They are always free to use persuasion to gain others' assent to their approach. Voluntarily they can promote the "binding tie of cohesive sentiment." In such efforts, dogmas and philosophies have had notably less effect than have symbols and stories.

Stories Survive and Serve

Max Lerner observed that "men possess thoughts, but symbols possess men," and his insight is helpful here as well. Lerner was opposing the notion that governments could live solely by rational appeals. His statement can be translated to "People possess stories, but stories possess people." Stories can generate symbols, and symbols often take on mythic and storied form. 1

The idea of "possession" has been a constant throughout these chapters. Who, we have asked, possesses the American story and
stories, the myths of the civil association and of the groups that make up national life? Lerner introduces a reciprocal note that needs stressing. Why continue to pay attention to stories at all, especially if leaders of many of the tribes that make up the nation insist that there is no grand narrative, or at least none they will accept for background or for purposes of unifying them? Given the issues that arise when narrative is mentioned, there are good reasons to ask: why story?

A comparison between the history of America and the longer history of Jews is to the point here. Dan Jacobson once discussed the story of the stories in a popular book of that title. Not a believer in the God of Israel, Jacobson was still engrossed with the story of God and God's chosen people that has animated Jewish history and somehow helps sustain Israel and Jews even today. Though convinced, as many Jews are not, that "Yahweh is wholly a human creation," Jacobson was especially drawn to the question of the power and ageless hold of the Yahweh story and of Israel's chosenness. In the South Africa of his childhood, the novelist had seen the power of this Jewish story when it was transferred to non-Jews. Supporters of apartheid used it as a grand narrative to provide a rationale for seeing themselves as the elect and chosen people of God, a people who could set the terms of life for others.

Jacobson subsequently mused about how the societies that developed along the Nile and the Tigris-Euphrates long ago had been "bound to be more powerful and hence more expansive" than any that perched on the rocky slopes where Judea and Samaria were founded. He added: "The rest—the 'facts' of conquest and enslavement—duly followed." The drama of his conclusion relates to our theme:

Only, the Hebrews had a story to tell; their conquerors did not. That was the sole advantage they had over them. And what an advantage that has turned out to be, all said and done! *Toutes proportions gardées*, something similar might perhaps be said about the myths adumbrated by some of the great modern writers. Their diagnoses of the ailments of our civilization, and the causes and cures they propose for these ills, may all be quite wide of the mark. Probably they are. The fact that they are believed to be accurate, however, does give them an objective importance which it would be pointless to deny.²

"The great modern writers" of whom Jacobson was speaking included Karl Marx, whose diagnoses of the world's ailments may still be believed by some. But Marx's cures have been unceremoniously rejected. Jacobson's company of writers, as recently as 1982, also still included Sigmund Freud, whose legacy is often now seen to be based on fundamentally flawed analyses. Do Jefferson and Jackson, Tocqueville and Lincoln, and others who have pondered how the one and the many relate in America belong to such a relatively obsolete company as well?

The totalists of republicanism do not think so, of course, nor do many in the separate groups that share space in America. The leaders of many of these groups find reasons to reject any common story as it has been told to date. The winners, the dominators, the oppressors, they insist, are the ones who formerly and exclusively told what they considered and wanted to be the common story. Therefore, their opponents declare, such a story cannot be trusted; it will only victimize them.

To this one must counter with a line from nineteenth-century German historians: you overcome history with history. So with narrative and myth and symbol: you overcome story with story. You break the spell of myth with another myth. You come out from under the dominance of a symbol not by rejecting the symbol but by seeing that another interpretation of it gets heard. Think of the current circumstance that includes critiques and retellings by African Americans of slave narratives; by Native Americans of reservation life; by Hispanic Americans of indignities against immigrants; by women, gays, and the poor of assaults and other mistold or untold portions of their stories. The accounts of Jefferson and Jackson, Tocqueville and Lincoln all sound very different to wary citizens than they would have a third of a century ago. But the stories themselves have not disappeared. In fact, those who criticize them often pay these stories the highest compliment by the attention they give them, neglected as they have been by most others.

Attacks on the traditions that possess us are often vicious, and the dismissals of the stories are often vehement. African Americans can, and some of their writers do, regularly criticize Jefferson for having been a racist, which he was, and for having kept slaves though he
knew better, which he did, though he was troubled about his practice. Or they may turn against Lincoln for having given a higher priority to saving the Union than to freeing the slaves, though he was a leader in both. Andrew Jackson cannot be forgiven, nor should he be, by Native Americans for his part in Indian removal and in producing the Trail of Tears.

The groups have to tell their own particular stories of their chosenness, whether in their victimhood or as liberated peoples. They add to this telling their own interpretation of what is often thought of as the general story of the United States. For others to try to silence them when they bring up the plot of their particular stories would be somehow dehumanizing. The larger society, if it has integrity, develops illness and experiences crisis when it tries to distort or ignore such stories. The German Catholic theologian Johann Baptist Metz, in “A Short Apology for Narrative,” connects the theme of story with memory in ways appropriate to mention here:

As Theodor Adorno observed, “Forgetting is inhuman because man’s accumulated suffering is forgotten—the historical trace of things, words, colours and sounds is always the trace of past suffering. This is why tradition is nowadays confronted with an insoluble contradiction. It is not present and cannot be evoked, but as soon as all tradition is extinguished, inhumanity begins.”

Unless Native Americans or Jews or the descendants of slaves speak up and tell their own stories, the legends will not be heard. Of course, the person who is not a member of one or another interpretive community may well replicate the concerns embodied in such storytelling communities. Doing such imaginative reconstructing is much of what narrative art is about. But unless an ethnic, racial, or religious group remains vigorous and finds ways to tell at least its central mythic stories, they will go neglected or be traduced by other tellers. And if those in communities profoundly shaped by memories of suffering (and often, of course, by the reality of continuing oppression and victimization) do not retell and reinterpret the central myths of the republic to include their experiences and vantages, inherited privileged readings will prevail and cast their spell.

My purpose here is not to propose the muffling of the groups in either venture but to see whether it is possible to move from models in which exclusiveness on the part of the once-excluded always has to prevail. Can there not be enrichment of each group by other groups, and of the whole by the parts in a symbiotic society? The stories of suffering are too important to be the possession alone of those descended from the sufferers. Certain ways of telling the stories can help lessen or end oppression for all. Metz quotes Martin Buber on the power of story:

The story is itself an event and has the quality of a sacred action . . . It is more than a reflection—the sacred essence to which it bears witness continues to live in it. The wonder that is narrated becomes powerful once more . . . A rabbi, whose grandfather had been a pupil of Baal Shem Tov, was once asked to tell a story. “A story ought to be told,” he said, “so that it is itself a help,” and his story was this. “My grandfather was paralysed. Once he was asked to tell a story about his teacher and he told how the holy Baal Shem Tov used to jump and dance when he was praying. My grandfather stood up while he was telling the story and the story carried him away so much that he had to jump and dance to show how the master had done it. From that moment, he was healed. This is how stories ought to be told.”

Those moved by that story find in it an illustration of the current point as well as a story itself and a corollary point. This instance comes from a subcommunity, Hasidism, and from a broader community, Judaism. But it is too good to be kept by and for such groups only. Telling it and acting upon it can enhance and humanize others of vastly different orientations. But who should tell the stories, and to whom are they to be told?

The Concept of Symbiotes

Here I return to Johannes Althusius and his concept of the symbiotes and argue that many of the particular stories of each of the groups can be told for all. Each group reinterprets the stories that are told more generally, for the sake of all. They are symbiotes. Where symbiosis does not occur, trauma results.

In 1933 the Oxford English Dictionary lexicographers spoke of symbiosis as “living together, social life” but had to mark the word obsolete and rare. Then they hurried to the biological definition, which
has analogies in the political sphere. Symbiosis is the "association of two different organisms... which live attached to each other... and contribute to each other's support." Then in finest print the dictionary writers add, and we can emphasize, that symbiosis is "also called commensalism or consortism; distinguished from parasitism, in which one organism preys upon the other." And the Supplement to the dictionary, dated 1987, adds, "Hence symbiote, a combination of two symbiotic organisms." By analogy, symbiotes are each of the plures acting upon one another and each acting in relation to the national unum. Symbiotes are the many to the many and the many to the one, the groups to the groups and the groups to the civil association—and in every case we can add, vice versa.

Good news about the word is evident in the 1987 Supplement: the lexicographers found reason to delete "obsolete, rare" from the definition "living together, social life," which is our usage. And the dictionary writers found many recent examples to flesh out the definition of symbiote. Thus an illustration from 1951 turns on the reality of the tribes, quoting Raymond Firth's Elementary Social Organization: the symbiote "is most evident in the case of an African tribe having its members intermingled with those of other tribes and in symbiotic relationship with them." The African tribal model in such a case deserves translation to the American situation of groups and their stories.

It is surprising that the dictionary writers did not know or cite the translation from 1964 by Frederick S. Carney of Johannes Althusius, where the Latin original symbiotici, "those who live together," was translated "symbiotes." In the most sustained use of the term, Althusius described the symbiotes both as "associated" co-workers or as "participants or partners in a common life," as we have observed Americans partnered in various relations based on gender, religion, class, interest, and the like.

Althusius himself recognized two kinds of symbiosis. One was the "natural" version, as between "married persons, blood relatives, and in-laws, in response to a natural affection and necessity, [who] agree to a definite communication among themselves." Such, Althusius added, is called "the most intense society, friendship, relationship, and union, the seedbed of every other symbiotic association," when these symbiotes are called "relatives, kinsmen, and friends."

The intense subcommunities of racial and ethnic groups often display such a character, by analogous extension. The "civil association" is the other sort of symbiosis. It bears a different character and exacts less intense involvement by the familial symbiotes. Here belongs the collegium, "a gathering, society, federation, sodality, synagogue, convention, or synod," when it is in the private sector. But there are also public associations.

Identity groups must be in some measure differentiated from each other and, in many cases, are somehow in competition—how can they reach across their boundaries to other intense subcommunities with their stories? How can they do so without being overthrown by them, or assimilated, or rendered so indistinct and tolerant that they lose their purposes?

The American Jewish community leadership typically asks this as it sees half the Jewish marriages today undertaken with non-Jews and knows that only one in twenty of these will produce a convert to the Jewish community. Should leaders stress such unions' alienation from or assimilation to the larger community? Should Jews tell stories of their difference and their experience of alienation or of their success at "fitting in"? Should religious bodies proffer stories of their difference, in a free-market competition? Or should they risk being eculmenical but therefore almost inevitably more bland and nondescript than if they were standoffish? Here is another case where the story-telling and story-hearing communities need to step carefully and find fresh models.

Achieving True Conversation

How do communities make these moves? They do so as groups just as we see individuals doing so, through various modes of speaking, listening, and acting. Here I draw upon and will extrapolate from the ideas of two thinkers with whom we converse in other chapters, Ernest Gellner and Michael Oakeshott. They are quite different: Oakeshott's "modes" are "arrests of experience" of an individual. Gellner's image is "modular man," a kind of human being that he sees making up modern national society. Gellner's point of reference is the furniture store's "modular furniture," where new bits can be added and "the whole thing will still have a coherence, aesthetically and
show devotion to the “religion of the Republic” as being expressive of the looser “civil associational” model and to their particular churches or other agencies of profound belief.

Moderns had been forced to learn how to live with what Robert Bellah called “multiplex consciousness.” Alfred Schutz noted that humans may have commitments to various “nonparamount realities” and various “universes of discourse” or “provinces of meaning.” Think of civil association and intense community as analogues to the following:

All these worlds—the world of dreams, of imageries and phantasms, especially the world of art, the world of religious experience, the world of scientific contemplation, the play world of the child, and the world of the insane—are finite provinces of meaning. This means that (a) all of them have a peculiar cognitive style . . .; (b) all experiences within each of these worlds are, with respect to this cognitive style, consistent in themselves and compatible with one another . . .; (c) each of these finite provinces of meaning may receive a specific accent of reality.

Schutz cited William James, who observed the human relating to various spheres, various realities. Each of these was a “world” which, "whilst it is attended to, is real after its own fashion; only the reality lapses with the attention." James recognized the need for focus: "My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind—without selective interest experience is an utter chaos." James wrote that all know what attention is—the kind of attention I believe groups can devote to realities beyond their own: "It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, consciousness are of its essence."

Schutz then developed his own concept of “multiple realities,” those “worlds” to which one can be attentive. Thus as a Hispanic American I may be attentive with one kind of intensity and awareness to my Pentecostal or Catholic church. With another mode of being alert I respond to the stories of my Salvadoran group of refugees. They are immigrants to the United States who have undergone the intense bonding experience of political persecution and ultimate escape. On a different level, the same "I," through a more generalized
association with "Hispanic Americans" in political causes, finds another set of stories valuable. And upon embracing and acquiring citizenship I became part of another set of attachments and stories.

It may be that my priest or pastor, with special theological warrant, will say that loyalty to Christ and the Church means the disdaining of other ties. My fellow refugees may see my bonds with them weakening as they and I acquire additional and new if less profound stories. Those organizing Hispanics for votes will see my other commitments as rivals. Now the issue also arises: in which political party will we put energies, and whose stories will we share? Not all will go the same way. The jingoist defender of constitutionalism might not want me to be loyal to any of the groups along the way. Yet I and all my fellow citizens who are not wholly given to totalism or tribalism somehow do negotiate with all these groups and associations, these storytellers and stories.

Schutz knows that "I" am busy: "The interests I have in the same situation as a father, a citizen, a member of my church or of my profession, may not only be different but even incompatible with one another," so I have to be alert and keep making choices about attentiveness.10

A rendering into the plural of Gellner's "modular man" and Oakeshott's "modes" of being for one person has been my own central focus. I believe that groups as well as individuals can be shown to have various "modes of experience." One can see evidence of this by comparing "the minutes of the meeting" of any such group from times of its political infighting to the face it presents when dealing with external rivals. Both may be authentic and true to the vision and purpose of the group, but they are very different modes.

Oakeshott's "modes" was a designation well poised for life in a pluralistic world, away from the whole, the unum, the dream of the totalist. Oakeshott detailed these in Experience and Its Modes. One may present one's self, or the life of one's group, through an infinite number of modes; Oakeshott concentrated on history, science, and practice. Modes are particular, consistent ways of viewing the world, thanks to the focus of attention. There are no floating realities; each must belong to a mode. Each issues in its own language or universes of discourse.11

As a philosopher, Oakeshott is most interested in modes of experience as personal and abstract,12 while here our interest is more political and concrete, focusing on the embodied experience (especially embodied in groups) and level of expression. A poet's testimony should help make the point clearer. Paul Valéry was trying to define the modern person, in an essay from 1932, "The Politics of the Mind." However we hypothesize the existence of premoderns—and there is no point in romanticizing notions of simplicity and wholeness among them—the modern person as Valéry described her confronts pluralities of "worlds" in Oakeshott's sense of that term. The modern person, the citizen, voter, candidate, taxpayer, common person, inhabits worlds that partly contradict the portraits provided by contemporary biology, psychology, or even psychiatry:

if a civilization's age is to be measured by the number of contradictions it contains, by the number of incompatible customs and beliefs to be found in it, all modifying each other, or by the multiplicity of philosophies and systems of aesthetics that coexist and cohabit in the same heads, it must be agreed that our civilization is one of the most ancient. Do we not constantly find several religions, several races, several political parties represented in one family ... and in one individual a whole armory of latent discord?

This questioning leads to Valéry's attempt to define the modern person:

and this is what makes him modern, [he] lives on familiar terms with many contraries waiting in the penumbra of his mind and coming by turns onto the stage. That is not all. We seldom notice these inner contradictions, or the coexisting antagonisms around us, and only rarely does it occur to us that they have not always been there.13

The concept we need here is that of "many contraries waiting in the penumbra of his mind." Many a citizen has made the judgment that Christopher Columbus was a fanatic, a crusader, a self-deluded messianic sort, a manipulator. He was someone who began the course of those who were agents of virtual genocide and slavery, plus the accidental bearers of disease. Yet from another angle, in a different mode, Columbus will be perceived differently in the mind of the same person who might also "happen to be" an Italian American, a Cath-
olic, an admirer of outstanding seamanship, and someone who believes that murderous impulses were also present and vigorously acted upon in the hemisphere before the Europeans arrived with Columbus.

Similarly, an African American, perhaps a civil rights worker, can consider Thomas Jefferson to have been inconsistent, not prescient. Jefferson would be seen to have been exploitative in holding slaves and an unimaginative racist, in one mode of perception. Yet the same person who has heard or told these stories has often turned around and seen Jefferson as the author of a Declaration of Independence that served her well when she was arguing for the application of rights to all citizens.

A third person may be a lesbian activist who, for the sake of focusing her energies, will not be in coalition with men, straight or gay—but in another mode and toward a different end may be an ardent Catholic, restless but still "there" in a patriarchal and hierarchical men's world. Such people are not being self-contradictory. They are addressing different situations and companies out of the center of a relatively coherent personhood. None grasps experience whole, but always through a preoccupying mode, with a focused intent.

The Difference between Argument and Story

So people in the various groups may live in partly incommensurable universes of discourse, and yet find it valuable to interact in ways other than through military force or in cultural conflict. Often these symbiotes will interact through the exercise of political power, which means finally through argument. People do not only tell stories. They have to find principled and pragmatic grounds for promoting justice, and they will always meet resistance. But even there, stories will help them. Instead of reaching for guns they reach for argument, and the telling of stories from different perspectives is a form of argument. One cannot have a republic without argument.

The various groups and subcommunities that make up the American civil association certainly do argue: they do this through their politicians and their own advocates and agents. Some of their argument is mindless and storyless. That is, it represents mere staking out of claims and some preemptions of privilege and power. But the history of argument between the groups and within the nation is rich.

In an argument, one somehow "knows" a proposition (call it an "answer"), defends it, and tries to convince or defeat the other. On those terms, an abused black lesbian can argue that her own group has experienced the greatest victimization, and it may be hard to argue with the claim. But most argument on such terms is hard to assess and has to be considered more as witness than anything else.

So those who stress modularity and the modes of experience that occur to individuals and groups tend to move, as Oakeshott does, to the model of conversation. If argument is impelled by the answers, conversation is moved and marked by the questions. Conversation does not have to be seen as soft, (merely) tolerant, muffled and mumbling, wishy-washy, or nice. But it differs from argument in that it is more open to the use of story to advance understanding, even if the stories are not always of shared experiences. I will not be able to share the experience of the Holocaust the way children of survivors do. The case of exposure to sexual abuse is similar, if I have not suffered it. But I can be humanized by the stories of those whose groups carry accounts of such suffering with them or who even have experienced them personally.

David Tracy has described conversation over against argument as "another kind of game," where "we learn to give in to the movement required by questions worth exploring":

The movement in conversation is questioning itself. Neither my present opinions on the question nor the text's original response to the question, but the question itself, must control every conversation. A conversation . . . is not a confrontation. It is not a debate. It is not an exam. It is questioning itself. It is a willingness to follow the question wherever it may go. It is dia-logue.

You may not convince me of anything if you try to quantify suffering, for example, by presenting comparative statistics on your social class's limited access to medical care. You may do that as well, of course. But that reasoned approach, supported by arguments from Aristotle or Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill or John Rawls, is not as likely to move me and my group as will stories of the fates of those denied such care. Tracy continues:

When human beings converse, they may converse, of course, about themselves. They may exchange their narratives, expose their hopes,
desires, and fears. They may both reveal and conceal who they think they are, and who they think the other may be—the other now become the conversation partner...

Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it... [These] good rules... are merely variations of the transcendental imperatives elegantly articulated by Bernard Lonergan: "Be attentive, be intelligent, be responsible, be loving, and, if necessary, change."14

Michael Oakeshott relates conversation to the concept of modes: the various "worlds" are brought together across the boundaries of subcommunities as an "unrehearsed intellectual adventure." In this case, argument belongs to what Aristotle calls prooairesis, purposive undertaking; conversation belongs to the voluntary sector, where life is lived sub specie voluntatis. In conversation there is no symposiarch or arbiter; not even a doorkeeper to examine credentials. Every entrant is taken at its face-value and everything is permitted which can get itself accepted into the flow of speculation. And voices which speak in conversation do not compose a hierarchy. Conversation is not an enterprise designed to yield an extrinsic profit, a contest where a winner gets a prize, nor is it an activity of exegesis; it is an unrehearsed intellectual adventure. It is with conversation as with gambling, its significance lies neither in winning nor in losing, but in wagering.15

From these remarks it is clear that both the mode of argument and the mode of conversation are necessary among civil associations and groups. When issues of justice are at stake, "winning and losing" are important. But when the cause is gaining empathy for another group's story, humanizing other elements of "the whole" by recounting a narrative of suffering, then the conversational model, not the confrontational, is what is needed. The quotation also suggests why leaders of totalist or tribalist groups are put off by conversation. Often in the cause of rejecting hierarchy they exemplify it; in attacking another's profit, they seek to advance their own. But many in groups find ben-

enefit in getting their story told and in hearing the other's, wagering on the benefits of the outcome for both.

Haunting all such talk of story in a pluralist society, of course, is still the reference of Alasdair MacIntyre and, before him, of John Courtney Murray to "incommensurable universes of discourse." What happens when groups are so alienated from one another and from civil association that they do not want to hear or cannot hear, and if they did listen, would repudiate all stories but their own—what happens, in other words, when the excluded turn exclusive? Trauma is the result. When the rejection of all other groups is willful, as in the case of leadership that has so great an investment in monologue, solipsism, and self-reinforcement as to have lost all motive or interest in hearing the other, not much can be done.

Still, if it is hard to picture a society in which everyone would want to converse, to enter the world of others, it is just as hard to picture a society in which the majority of citizens have no commitment to participating outside their own separatist groups. All kinds of voluntary groups have overlapping memberships, and one person may belong to several groups whose boundaries are not coextensive. Many citizens, it seems, are taking part in civic association even as they seek lively groups for more intimate and intense life—or go their own individualist ways. Successful recruitment to the conversation from this sizable cohort is likely to be of more aid to the republic and the groups in it than is listening to strident attacks by the militants who confirm their own mandarin cohorts, alienate everyone else, and create backlash.

To assert all this is less productive than to examine the way stories can be told and treated in all their ambiguity. A myth or a story that does not contain ambiguity or evoke some ambivalence is likely to be a very forgettable piece of propaganda. It is striking to see that the histories designed to give due attention to the excluded or once-excluded must revisit all the focal myths of the tradition that is being questioned or attacked. We can see this by reference to the founding myths of Columbus and then of the Founders; the texts of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution; the myths that come with the emancipation of slaves and Lincoln's desire first to save the Union; our opening myth about the space shuttle Challenger. The list could certainly be extended, perhaps even indefinitely.
A sample text is that of Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*. Takaki has as his mission to call into question the presumed single American story as it got enshrined and encrusted in the tellings of people of European descent. How different will it look in the hands of the “others,” the “different,” who hold up a different mirror? Critical as it understandably is of the old received tradition and its custodians, the book is not a book of exclusions but of enrichments. Yet to make any sense of it, one must revisit all the central stories that Takaki wants to move off of center stage. Almost as set as the framework of the biblical canonical stories are the plots of books like his. Columbus. Slavery. Reservations. White ethnic history. Hispanics and the Mexican War. The Chinese in the Gold Rush. Eastern European Jewish immigration. Chicanos and the border. Northern blacks. The Holocaust. Japanese Americans in concentration camps in the West. Martin Luther King and civil rights. Had Takaki chosen to include gender, religion, and class in his “different mirrors,” there would have been the same relativizing of the standard or canonical plot chapters, with its subversion of their single set of meanings, but still a revisiting of the tradition even as he supplemented it.

Takaki begins with the problem of the one and the many, citing E. D. Hirsch: “If we had to make a choice between the one and the many, most Americans would choose the principle of unity, since we cannot function as a nation without it.” Hirsch would accumulate and share symbols. Only thus “can we learn to communicate effectively with one another in our national community.” The *New York Times* looks on when such claims are made and reflects, as it did during a curricular battle in New York in 1990, “Essentially, the issue is how to deal with both dimensions of the nation’s motto: E pluribus unum— ‘Out of many, one.’ ” Takaki quoted Rodney King following the riots in Los Angeles in 1992, after the police who had beaten him were acquitted: “Please, can we get along here? We all can get along. I mean, we’re all stuck here for a while. Let’s try to work it out.” This was a translation of John Courtney Murray’s call for civility against the barbarians when he defined a republic as people locked in civil argument. Takaki, however, seized the moment after Rodney King’s plea to ask, “But how should ‘we’ be defined? Who are the people ‘stuck here’ in America?” The Los Angeles “we” differed from the national “we.” In Los Angeles blacks represent only 13 percent of the population, but Hispanics number 40 percent. Takaki wants the Asian, Native American, and Hispanic stories told: “The telling of stories liberates.” He quotes Tomo Shojis, an elderly Nisei woman, who called on her fellow Asian Americans to learn about their own roots: “We got such good, fantastic stories to tell. All our stories are different.”

Takaki’s history reveals more of the values of shared narrative, jostling as they may be to received tradition, than of an off-putting anthology of exclusions:

While our stories contain the memories of different communities, together they inscribe a larger narrative. Filled with what Walt Whitman celebrated as the “varied carols” of America, our history generously gives all of us our “mystic chords of memory.” Throughout our past of oppressions and struggles for equality, Americans of different races and ethnicities have been “singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.” . . . Our denied history “bursts with telling.” As we hear America singing, we find ourselves invited to bring our rich cultural diversity on deck, to accept ourselves. “Of every hue and caste am I,” sang Whitman. “I resist any thing better than my own diversity.”

The language may be a bit romantic and florid, but it suggests that the attempt to bring many ethnic perspectives to a single history may well enrich the republic, not lead to self-exclusion.

Whoever compares a book like Takaki’s with the heritage of McGuffey’s readers and the nostalgic renderings of American “sameness” may come to the realization that the often-cited tradition to which John Jay referred two centuries ago is by no means the most familiar part of the emergent canon. Thanks to efforts by people like Takaki for many years, the parallel set of stories has become part, almost the privileged part, of the canon.

Picture an examination of a high school class: what are these young people likely to know after watching television, attending public school? Is any white Protestant social activist as well known to them today as Martin Luther King is? Is any male Catholic’s career as familiar a part of the story of activism as Dorothy Day’s? Any northern male Catholic novelist as familiar to today’s collegians as Flannery O’Connor or Toni Morrison? Any contemporary music issuing from
northern Europe as familiar as the music coming from Mexico or the Caribbean?

High school students may have heard that there was a Mayflower, that John Winthrop and others talked of a “City upon a Hill,” or that a weird, severe man named Jonathan Edwards wanted us to see ourselves suspended as a spider above a flame, with hell in the distance. Beyond that, could the rest of the New England stories be as familiar a part of secondary education as is that of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam? Are the stories of white settlers of the West today any longer as familiar as the plot of Dances with Wolves and its lesser clones? Are there real worries that today’s America overremembers the best-known mainstream Protestant ministers of the mid-nineteenth century, people like Horace Bushnell; or do Joseph Smith of the Mormons, Mary Baker Eddy of Christian Science, and the countercultural and utopian communists go neglected? Just the opposite. It is time to notice how drastically the presumed canon has already changed and to reward the students who excel in this new curriculum.

When conflict over texts and curricula heats up, one reads all kinds of analyses of the motives of leaders. In all cases, obvious plays for power on the part of the leadership have to be noticed. Mere devotion to ideology, be it leftover Marxism, revised Freudianism, the reworked Enlightenment, Judeo-Christianism, or Christianism, is a demonstrable motivator, as revealed by numerous texts written by partisans. Many of the charges imply group narcissism or solipsism. Such people look into Takaki’s different mirror and find it made up of many mirrors. They look only into their own. But other uses of the mirror are possible.

Myths against the World’s indifference

If the conversation is to be advanced, a search for motives other than self-portrayal is also profitable. Among the most compelling clues that I have come across, clues that can be followed through careful reading of texts by those who want their group to be heard, were those offered in a work on myth by Leszek Kolakowski. He wrote The Presence of Myth in 1966, but Polish authorities suppressed it and it did not appear in English until 1989, in a context very different from the one in which he wrote.

One listens, says Kolakowski, to the stories of sufferers, victims, the oppressed, or those who have endured and sometimes triumphed. These are stories designed to illumine and display a group’s experience. In the course of time it becomes clear that the tellers were addressing what Kolakowski calls the “phenomenon of the world’s indifference.” The victims of the Holocaust went almost unnoticed by the world at large. Survivors and heirs cry out against posthumous indifference.

The horrifying accounts of brutality against slaves rarely give reference to the name of someone whose heirs were compensated, whose grave one can visit. The world looks on, indifferent. The ignominy and deprivation suffered by Japanese Americans rounded up into camps from 1942 to 1945 was not balanced by the few dollars grudgingly doled out to survivors decades later. Indifference. Homosexual men and women suffer stigma and are asked by society to change what they see as their fundamental nature, to “stay in the closet,” and certainly not to band together. They are subjects of the world’s indifference. So are the anonymous people who suffered on the Trail of Tears or whose hearts are buried at Wounded Knee. Cemetery stones erode, descendants move away and forget, and everything is subject to transience. So the organized indifference on the part of dominant or rival peoples is especially infuriating.

Kolakowski speaks of the role of myth against the world’s indifference. Why be indifferent? “The simplest answer is that we are running away from suffering.” And what does all suffering have in common? “That from which we flee is the experience of the world’s indifference, and attempts to overcome this indifference constitute the crucial meaning of human struggle with fate, both in its everyday and its extreme form.” Thus “in dying and in the death of our loved ones, what is most acute is precisely that they become indifferent towards us, absorbed irrevocably in the place whence they ostentatiously demonstrate a complete lack of interest in us.”

We can do nothing about all this. Kolakowski speaks instead of the living company we keep: “we all know that we live only thanks to various kinds of nonindifference in our encounters with people: thanks to solidarity, trust, love, and friendship.”

Kolakowski notes how intense and ecstatic the communion of the intimate group can be. “Identification with other people or
groups of people," almost on the model of sexual communion, suggests this:

Flights from the indifference of the world via edifices which enable us to be absorbed in communal life through identification with family, tribal, or national groups is not by any means worthless; but it does seem that in this respect the all-or-nothing rule prevails, that therefore partial or fleeting identifications do not truly exist.

So such endeavors do not truly satisfy efforts to overcome the experience of the world's indifference. They are efforts to "conceal this experience from ourselves in a complex system of arrangements which distract life in daily facticity." Here is where myth comes in. "Myth, be it religious or philosophical . . . has the power of removing the world's indifference." 18

Thus the early nationalists in America had to render the Constitution a part of sacral mythology and thus Abraham Lincoln spoke as he did at Gettysburg and elsewhere. This is why the long-term custodians of national traditions in the school texts had to invent an America that never was. This is also why those who would subvert the invention choose myths that sometimes create unrealistic pictures of the daily lives of oppressed and excluded people. This is why advocates of the Judeo-Christian legacies had to combine them and name the combination a tradition, though it had never existed elsewhere. This is why they had to engage in great theological leaps in order to fabricate a set of values for the tradition—while overlooking the lethal elements in the mandates of both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament.

The question remains, in the face of the potential misuse of story and myth, in the name of both the unum and the plures: how can we minimize the damage the stories can do, given the ambiguity and the "dark side" locked into the stories? The advocate of pluralism sees the best safeguard in the interaction of groups that hear and tell them. The best possibilities for common life issue from their conversation and from conversation's self-correcting character. The possibilities are most slender when people restrict all value-creating signals to those of their own group. Common life happens most often when one engages in acts of "plural belonging." George P. Fletcher in his essay on loyalty uses the image of intersecting circles:

We typically find ourselves in a set of intersecting circles of loyal commitment. In the United States and indeed in virtually every modern culture, we are members of multiple groups that demand our loyalties. A typical American is a member not only of a family but of an ethnic group, a profession or trade, a particular firm, a church or religious community, the alumni circles of high school and university, and perhaps an amateur athletic team or the fan club of a local hockey or basketball team. Add to this list the special loyalties of veterans and the politically active, and you generate a picture of the typical American caught in the intersection of at least a half dozen circles of loyal attachment.

Viewing recent change, Fletcher adds:

Despite the vast immigration of Hispanics and Asians in recent years, the coming out of gays and lesbians, the new assertiveness of feminist, Jewish and black leaders, one is hard pressed to impose on the cultural patterns of the United States the kind of enclaving that has existed for centuries in other countries. The pop culture of TV sitcoms, McDonald's, Peanuts, and Superman, the Dodgers, hating Saddam Hussein, feeling compassion for Magic Johnson, pondering the credibility of Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas—these are constitutive cultural experiences affecting virtually all Americans. Those who claim cultural rifts in the United States comparable to the endless tribal clashes of Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa miss the beat of American life. 19

It is this characteristic that makes both totalist and tribalist leaders so suspicious of conversation and multiple belonging. To build confidence in stories that promote the cohesive sentiment in a republic without doing injustice to the groups that share life in it, we will focus next on the realization of a common space, the arena for its stories and their explanations, and then on what we will call "constituting" myths that all Americans somehow share, however much they disagree on their meanings.
Introduction:
Tools for Moving from Argument to Conversation

On September 11, 1998, a curious event occurred at the White House. The president convoked an unusual gathering of highly visible clergy to the usual Religious Leaders' Breakfast. There he confessed that he had sinned and asked for the forgiveness of all the American people.

In what other republic or industrialized nation would the chief executive or prime minister regard himself as a sort of priest who could convoke clergy and then turn himself into a penitent, turning the American people, as a body, into confessors?

None.

United States citizens, with few alert, noisy, and scrupulous exceptions, take such actions for granted. At any moment, half of them may not like the way a particular president plays priest and pastor. Liking or not liking depends in part on the political taste of critics and fans. It depends in part how they read the First Amendment to the United States Constitution and how careful they are about drawing a line between religion and civil authority or how messy they choose to be about lines that almost inevitably blur.

Reaction to the 1998 Religious Leaders' Breakfast revealed, if nothing else did, how the American people were ending the decade, the century, and the millennium, showing with good reason that they remain confused about the ways religion relates to government and the way politics gets webbed with religion.
You would think that in the more than two centuries since the American colonists got rid of the king and the American constitutionalists set the priests aside from their government, the people and their leaders would have sorted out the various roles religious figures do and should play in national life. They have not. Confusion keeps growing.

In an effort to help readers make sense of the events of 1998, political scientist Sebastian de Grazia, author of A Country with No Name: Tales from the Constitution, traced the confusion through history. He asked whether the president’s convoking and confessing showed him to be “high priest, ecumenical patriarch, archbishop, pontifex maximus.” Keeping the incident in mind, de Grazia asked, “Was this unheard-of appeal to the American people an idiosyncrasy of the incumbent president, a presidential act unlikely to ever occur again, or does it have broader implications?”

It has broader implications.

The Constitution, reminded de Grazia, “did not contemplate the President’s becoming a religious or spiritual leader. The Constitution made no mention of God.” Yet moral leaders such as Washington, Lincoln, Wilson, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt attached God to their exhortations. Jefferson resisted the priestly role. The Constitution, he thought, prohibited the government “from meddling with religious institutions, their doctrines, disciplines, or exercises.” Until the 1950s, presidents violated Jefferson’s definition only in wartime and only then assuming the priestly role to rally a religion-favoring populace.

Then came Dwight Eisenhower, who became “convinced that his mission as President was to restore the nation’s spirituality.” He himself was baptized the Sunday after he was inaugurated. Soon Congress inserted the words “under God” into the Pledge of Allegiance, which public schoolchildren were expected to recite daily. Eisenhower started the presidential prayer breakfast tradition that any subsequent president would disrupt at peril to his or her reputation.

Each subsequent president has had his own style, but every one has felt called upon to identify himself as a professing Christian. The most recent have identified themselves as born-again Christians and each of these has tended to embody one or more of the following traits: “evangelism, a preacherly rhetoric, the baptism of believers, a crusading zeal, and reliance on the Book.”

Again one asks, where else would the top officer of government aspire to anything like this, and where else would the people accept it or, indeed, not rise up against it?

The September 11 incident, in de Grazia’s eyes, was peculiar also for what it revealed to other nations about Americans’ self-description: “They have locked in a materialist stereotype the country [the President] presides over.” And “somehow the globe today appears not to see America bathed in the . . . spiritual light” that had Americans in their own eyes assuming moral leadership. Therefore, “when countries religiously estranged from the United States look for some sign of spirituality, there is generally not much visible to the naked eye. They have little choice but to look to the President.”

Meanwhile, de Grazia urged, there is likely to be in future decades “a certain amount of competition among clergy for the President’s favor,” and “the President will take on more and more openly the colouring of a high priest” as “the presidential ecumene [spiritually interactive worlds] seems to be expanding.” No serious presidential candidate can be elected if not at home in that “ecumene.”

Closer to Home: Issues of Politics and Religion

Despite all the media attention, the September 11, 1998, event is far from the personal experience of most citizens. If they favor a president and his or her convoked clergy, they will applaud the priestly role of this civil authority. If they disfavor a president and the set of clergy he or she favors, they will be critical of all—and
then wait for their kind of president to invite their kind of clergy for the kind of priestly ceremonies they like. Still, it all seems remote.

Close to home, however, all citizens, whether they know it or show it, are involved in these unsettled understandings of government, politics, and religion.

For example, suppose you are a taxpaying property owner in a residential suburb that thrives chiefly on homeowners' taxes. You are religiously indifferent, perhaps a bit hostile to organized religion, and you are surrounded by churches you despise. And they do not pay property taxes, which means that your taxes are somewhat higher and you indirectly subsidize them and their doings. Is that fair? Advisable? Constitutional?

Or you are a taxpaying property owner who helps subsidize public school education. You may have withdrawn your children from the public schools because you disagree with some school practices and teachings. You and your spouse work outside the home and cannot sustain home schooling. Thus you must send your children to religiously run schools that charge tuition. "We're getting double-taxed," you'll say.

Or you may agree with what the public school is about but have a religious commitment that leads you to want your children to become responsible citizens through parochial education. You get no financial relief for having taken some of the burden off the public school and thus having lowered its expenses. Is that fair? Advisable? Constitutional?

You may not have the luxury of belonging to a communion that quarrels little with mainstream ways of doing things. If you are a Christian Scientist and thus a disbeliever in conventional medicine or a Jehovah's Witness and therefore object to blood transfusions, you might see the civil courts reach in and take your children from you temporarily while they get standard medical care of sorts that violate your religious commitment. God gave you those children. The government takes them away, you say. Is that fair? Advisable?

You are assured the "free exercise of religion" by the First Amendment to the Constitution. Yet you are not free to exercise your religion in public places on the public's time. You cannot have the Ten Commandments on the courtroom wall, prescribed Bible reading or prayer in the public classroom, or your version of creation taught in the schools while other moral frameworks, philosophies, and what look to you like religions get a free ride. Is that fair? Advisable?

In political campaigns, you are an economic conservative who also supports abortion and gay rights. Yet you know that no candidate can be chosen to represent your party unless he or she caters to Christian conservative coalitions that militate against your stand. Or you are a pro-life citizen who resents the fact that in order to get elected, your candidate wavers on the religiously inspired social issues. Why must you tolerate such cruel alternatives within your party?

Or you are a liberal, and you ground your convictions about government and politics in divine law, natural law, the words of the prophets and mystics, and the spiritual leaders of your tradition. You are not so much nonreligious as "other-religious." Yet the questions that poll takers ask and the reports in the newspapers tend to categorize you as unmoved by religion just because you don't follow the style of religiosity they instantly recognize. Why can't you rely on your distinctive religious coloring in politics?

Far from the White House, in your house, issues like these present themselves every day.

The Need to Think and Converse About These Issues

It may have seemed insulting to read that Americans remain "confused" about how government and politics interact with religion. Most intense and partisan activists will say they are not confused. They are perfectly clear about walls of separation between church
and state and whether someone is violating them. They know exactly what it means that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion” and that they are to have free exercise of religion. It’s someone else who is confused and spreads confusion to the point that you get frustrated, furious, left out. Then you meet someone else who bullies you into a corner with an argument you find hard to refute. You have never had to think deeply about these things. Now you scramble to stay ahead.

Put the title “member of the board” before a name, and it is likely that you will enter the company of the confused. Be a member of the school board, hospital board, library board, zoning board, town board, church trustees board, or community college board, and you’ll likely see incidents that erupt routinely, problems that constantly appear. You and your colleagues gather the whole board and invite the whole public. In the resulting conversation, you do not want to miss an opportunity on the one hand or get assaulted by those who stir these issues on the other. You need a resource on which to draw, a framework to do your own thinking, a sense of what has gone on elsewhere. We hope this book will be one such resource.

You want to do the right thing by your God, your tradition, your country, the public order, the law and the courts, and your fellow citizens. You have found that shouting, polarization, and demeaning arguments are of no help. We hope that the model of conversation presented in this book will be helpful.

The Basics: Politics, Religion, and Public Religion

To encourage conversation about religion and politics, we think it’s important for every person to have some basic tools in his or her citizenship toolbox. The elemental tools—the hammer and nails—for our project are clear understandings of what we’re talking about. What do we mean by politics? By religion? By public religion?

Politics

To stimulate your imagination, let’s look at some of the pithy and provocative things that cynical, humorous, and thoughtful people have said politics is:

“The art of the next best.” (Otto von Bismarck)

“A realm, peopled only by villains or heroes, in which everything is black or white and gray is a forbidden color.” (John Mason Brown)

“The moral man’s compromise, the swindler’s method, and the fool’s hope.” (John Ciardi)

“The possession and distribution of power.” (Benjamin Disraeli)

“Persuading the public to vote for this and support that and endure these for the promise of those.” (Gilbert Highet)

“The most interesting thing you can do.” (John F. Kennedy)

“An activity in which the choice is constantly between two evils.” (John Morley)

“A profession in which you cannot be true to all your friends all of the time.” (Michael Pazaine)

“The art of making possible that which is necessary.” (Paul Valéry)

In a slightly more sustained fashion, British political scientist Bernard Crick provides a rich description of the meaning and function of politics in a republic:

Politics is conservative—it preserves the minimum benefits of established order; politics is liberal—it is compounded of particular liberties and it requires tolerance; politics is socialist—it provides conditions for deliberate
social change by which groups can come to feel that they have an equitable stake in the prosperity and survival of the community. ... Politics does not just hold the fort; it creates a thriving and polyglot community outside the castle walls.

Politics ... is a way of ruling in divided societies without undue violence. This is both to assert, historically, that there are some societies at least which contain a variety of different interests and differing moral viewpoints; and to assert, ethically, that conciliation is at least to be preferred to coercion among normal people. ... Political ethics are not some inferior type of ethical activity, but are a level of ethical life fully self-contained and fully justifiable. Politics is not just a necessary evil; it is a realistic good.

Political activity is a type of moral activity; it is free activity, and it is inventive, flexible, enjoyable, and human; it can create some sense of community and yet is not, for instance, a slave to nationalism; it does not claim to settle every problem or to make every sad heart glad, but it can help some way in nearly everything and, where it is strong, it can prevent the vast cruelties and deceits of ideological rule. 

Religion

For some people, religion means everything listed in the “Churches and Synagogues” section of the Yellow Pages. For others, religion means the individualized spirituality so popular today. People may also include various forms of public or civil religion, some of them connected with the state itself. Sociologist Peter Berger has spoken of a “sacred canopy” that arches over individual life and that of sub-communities. What goes on under this sacred canopy is part of our concern when discussing religion and politics.

Before we get into the scholarly understandings, I wish again to provoke your imagination, stimulate discussion, entertain, and illustrate the wide range of possibilities, this time exploring definitions of religion:

“The search for a value underlying all things.” (Gordon W. Allport)

“The voice of the deepest human experience.” (Matthew Arnold)

“Man’s search ... for strength and courage to be gained from the heart of spiritual matter, greater than an individual man, greater than the more or less human race.” (Bernard Iddings Bell)

“A phase of a people’s total interaction with the objective world of nature, organized society and the accumulated tradition of an historic past.” (William C. Bower)

“The basis of civil society, and the source of all good and all comfort.” (Edmund Burke)

“The holy service of God.” (William Camden)

“The sense of ultimate reality, of whatever meaning a man finds in his own existence or the existence of anything else.” (G. K. Chesterton)

“The rule of life, not a casual incident of it.” (Benjamin Disraeli)

“A bandage that man has invented to protect a soul made bloody by circumstance.” (Theodore Dreiser)

“The emotion of reverence which the presence of the universal mind ever excites in the individual.” (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

“A universal obsessional neurosis.” (Sigmund Freud)

“The feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in
relation to whatever they may consider the divine.” (William James)

“A sense of something transcending the expected or natural.” (Robert C. Lowie)

“The opium of the people.” (Karl Marx)

“A noble attempt to suggest in human terms more-than-human realities.” (Christopher Morley)

“The idea of a Moral Governor, and a particular Providence.” (John Henry Newman)

“Man’s attempt to get in touch with an absolute spiritual Reality behind the phenomena of the Universe, and having made contact with It, to live in harmony with It.” (Arnold J. Toynbee)

Now for a more sustained effort. Scholars will never agree on the definition of religion, but here we consider five features that can help point to and put boundaries around the term.

1. Religion Focuses Our “Ultimate Concern”

Religion focuses for the faithful what theologian Paul Tillich called their “ultimate concern.” What is the overarching purpose of life? What do we most care about? For what would you be willing to die? Citizens can answer those questions in many different ways—and sometimes in ways that go beyond what we typically think is “religious.” For example, if one is willing to die for the ideas symbolized by the swastika, that points toward an “ultimate concern.” If one believes not that the universe is related to a deity but instead that human fate depends on the location of the stars at the time of one’s birth, that faith points to an astrological ultimate concern for the starred person. Those who think that “I” connects with “It” as an energy field pervading the universe and who order their lives around this thought have found their object of ultimate concern in something today coded as “New Age,” even if they are on the church rolls as Catholic or Episcopalian. Tillich’s notion of ultimate concern allows us to consider “religious” any belief systems that take up the meaning and purpose of human existence.

Ultimate concern, because it points to the very meaning of life itself, naturally has something to do with politics and government. Politics asks many questions that can either further or hinder one’s understanding of ultimate concern. How should society be ordered? What is society’s responsibility to the poor? How much money should we spend on the military? Should abortion or assisted suicide be legal? How much control should the state have over family life? Politics and government must answer these questions, and in doing so they must consider the multiple and often contradictory ultimate concerns of its citizens. And citizens, in helping shape political answers to those questions, will unavoidably rely on their ultimate concerns in making decisions. The intermingling of religion—understood as ultimate concern—and politics is therefore inescapable.

2. Religion Builds Community

Ultimate concern does not by itself point to religion, as religion is traditionally understood; the phrase is too broad to identify the subset of overarching commitments that we usually call “religious.” Another element of religion is the impulse to build community, to form social responses.

“Take the shoes off your feet, for the ground on which you are standing is holy” (Exodus 3:5): this word to Moses from a voice near a burning bush that was not consumed is followed immediately with a call to find and deal with and lead what the voice calls “my people.” The creator of awe wants a religious people of a special sort to be formed as a people, a social order, a community. Though in late modern times, individualized religion has become increasingly popular, social forms of religion still overwhelmingly predominate.

Religion’s impulse to community has rich and obvious implications for politics. Most people who enter political life do it as part
of a mission, and some feel called to live a life of public service as part of a religious duty. Even those driven chiefly by self-interest must convince an electorate that they have in mind broader concerns for justice, equity, and the general welfare. A politician’s constituents, at all levels of government, will normally belong to multiple communities, including religious groups. Successful politicians will need to attend to the perspectives of those communities if they hope to remain in office.

3. Religion Appeals to Myth and Symbol

The religious do more than engage in rational, matter-of-fact discourse about public matters. Indeed, religious adherents are often motivated by myth and symbol. Myth, in this context, does not point to something fictional or untrue; instead, myth refers to extraordinary means of stating truths. For those who respond, myth is often the only way to fully capture truth, and such myths help organize communities. Thus the scriptural “I will be your God and you will be my people” does better than “we the people of the United States” for purposes of building religious community. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” and “the human is made in the image of God” are claims that better reorient group life than mathematical renderings of the Big Bang or evolutionary explanations of human origins do. The political rhetorician who has to summon the energies of a demoralized people and propel them into action will not say “Eighty-seven years ago some colonists declared independence from their colonizers” but rather “Fourscore and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth a new nation.”

As with myth, so with symbol. The Star of David, the Crescent, the Cross, the sacred meal, the rite of initiation—all symbolize the “special and surprising” messages of particular faiths. Other systems of ultimate concern also appeal to symbols—the swastika, the fasces, the rising sun, the hammer and sickle all point toward comprehensive understandings of reality and human purpose.

The religious appeal to myth and symbol affects politics in obvious ways. Politics often mimics this appeal—politicians and citizens alike respond to mythical stories, and government often evokes many kinds of symbols. Whoever has been to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier or the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C.; whoever has heard debates over the need for a constitutional amendment prohibiting flag burning; whoever has known the terrifying power of the Ku Klux Klan insignia or America Nazi Party emblems; whoever has read the speeches of Abraham Lincoln—all are aware of the emotive, bonding, and impelling power of stories that come as myth and signs that come as symbols.

4. Religion Is Reinforced Through Rites and Ceremonies

Religion includes the impulse to reinforce religious faith through rites and ceremonies. Male children might be circumcised, community members might be baptized, or converts may make an official pledge. Other rites greet the new spring, plead for a prosperous planting and harvest, bind couples in marriage, or prepare individuals for death. The profound and awe-inspiring religions point toward “another world” by using rites and ceremonies to invest “ordinary” events with greater significance.

Politics also depends on rites and ceremonies. They include such activities as administering an oath of office, swearing in new citizens, and publicly commemorating important historical events. Even in avowedly secular nations, such as those once behind the Iron Curtain, leaders depend on rites and ceremonies to foster group identity. Rites and ceremonies help a group of people form and remain a coherent community.

5. Religion Demands Certain Behaviors from Its Adherents

Almost all religions stipulate that followers behave in certain ways and not in others. The potent religions also stipulate behavioral correlates and consequences for adherents. From the vital faiths come
various demands: You must attend Mass. You mustn’t drink intoxicating beverages. You must refrain from eating pork. You must make a pilgrimage to Mecca. You must place joss sticks on the sacred fire at the dawn of the new year. The more religion expects and exacts such behaviors, the more adherents will draw a distinctive boundary between themselves and others.

Politics and governments also demand certain behaviors. Politicians pass laws, and governments enforce them; citizens can expect to be penalized if they don’t follow society’s rules. Citizens who transgress certain rules may be accused of treason—the political form of heresy.

Public Religion

Americans often speak of religion as “a private affair.” Yet as long ago as 1749, Benjamin Franklin spoke of “the necessity of a publik religion” for the health of the republic.1 We contend that America still needs “publick religion,” which has much to contribute to the common good. But what do we mean by publck religion?

As with the term religion, we forgo a precise definition and instead point to phenomena that help describe what we’re talking about. This first thing to notice is that publck religion is naturally posed against private religion. But is this polarity helpful?

In some senses, public religion can only be understood in opposition to private religion: public religion is what private religion is not, and vice versa. But this polarity can often restrict our vision. Some scholars have suggested that these two categories do not exhaust the possibilities; for example, a concept like “the social” can help describe places where public and private intersect.

Public and private need not refer to polar opposites. Public religion would not exist were there not repositories of private faith in the consciousness and practice of millions of Americans. And such so-called private religion depends in many ways on the public legal framework and cultural environment in which faiths prosper.

There are clearly many reasons to use the term public religion with care, but we still think it is a useful concept. For us, public religion refers to religion’s public implications, those places where religion seems to have an identifiable—and potentially extricable—influence on public life.

When and Where to Talk:
Some Settings for Dialogue

As we have seen, public religion and politics share many features. Indeed, it is hard to think of any descriptions, definitions, or citations of profound elements in politics and government that are not somehow religious. As well, public religion and politics inevitably intersect. With some basic tools in hand, we now turn to the interactions between religion and politics and how best to negotiate those interactions.

When and where should we talk? Whenever and wherever people discuss politics. Politics, by dealing with proposals for the common good, inevitably touches on people’s basic ideas about what is most important in life. For most Americans, this means drawing on religious understandings of reality and human purpose. Here are some more specific occasions where this kind of dialogue can and should occur:

Whenever individuals seek greater personal understanding of how religion and politics interact, so as to better enable informed and active citizenship

Where individuals—whether as voters, activists, or leaders—find opportunities to act publicly for the civic good

Whenever school boards, library boards, hospital boards, church groups, or other community organizations face creative or disruptive challenges involving the public good
In adult education courses or college classes that touch on religion and politics
Where public policymakers, philanthropic foundations, or corporations don't want to be caught off guard by sudden changes on the religion-and-politics front

How to Talk: Argument, Conversation, and Dialogue

If this book is to advance a national conversation, we should be clear about what we mean by conversation. What is real conversation? Is it any different from argument or dialogue? These words have rich possibilities and are worth discussing.

Should We Argue?

"Civilization is formed by men locked together in argument," observed the Dominican priest Thomas Gilby. In argument, the various sides propose theses and then set out to make a point. Serious arguers propose theses as truths and then insist that their truths are the correct answers to the problem. Thus I can defend the thesis that since the Constitution assures "free exercise of religion," this free exercise must mean that teachers have a right to conduct classroom devotions in line with their beliefs and those of the majority of pupils. You can argue that such devotions and neglect of the minority are contrary to the "establishment of religion" clause. We read the history of the Constitution, study law and history, summon logic, figuratively roll up our sleeves and engage one another. If as contestants we cannot convert those on the other side to our truth, we will want at least to defeat them. By conversion or mere victory, we hope to demonstrate that we, and not our opponents, have the more persuasive position.

Father John Courtney Murray, one of the great theorists of republican existence, placed argument at the center of his understanding of America. Drawing on the insight of Thomas Gilby, Murray proposed that "the distinctive bond of the civil multitude is reason, or more exactly, that exercise of reason which is argument." Without civil argument, citizens and their representatives could not legislate in ways that might ensure some measure of justice or equity. Self-interested people make up the body politic, and their desires are not shared by others. Politics thrives on argument between these various interests. Government, or at least good government, results when these interests successfully address the common good.

But what is the American argument about? In an important 1960 work, Murray developed an answer to that question. For Murray, the American argument concerned three major themes. First, "the argument is about public affairs, the res publica, those matters which are for the advantage of the public (in the phrase as old as Plato) and which call for public decision and action by government." Second, the American argument "concerns the affairs of the commonwealth." And finally, "the most important and the most difficult" theme of the American argument "concerns the constitutional consensus whereby the people acquire its identity as a people and the society is endowed with its vital form, ... its sense of purpose as a collectivity organized for action in history."

What does Murray mean by this consensus? "This consensus is come to by the people; they become a people by coming to it. ... It is an ensemble of substantive truths, a structure of basic knowledge, an order of elementary affirmations that reflect realities inherent in the order of existence." Murray contended that "the whole premise of the public argument, if it is to be civilized and civilizing, is that the consensus is real, that among the people everything is not in doubt, but that there is a core of agreement, accord, concurrence, acquiescence. We hold certain truths; therefore we can argue about them."

For all its virtues and potential, argument also has limits. Too often arguments are unfairly tilted toward the side with a better
social position, more economic privileges, or a better education. In political argument, well-financed lobbies exert power far beyond the numbers of people they represent. To take a controversial example, polls say that the public has for years favored many kinds of gun control. But the National Rifle Association, representing a highly dedicated minority of citizens, can focus and provide its resources and energies to help ensure the election of candidates who will speak up for policies the NRA favors. By the time a legislature has been elected, the candidates favoring one approach may well be in position to command the media, to summon arguments—and to keep the underorganized majority at a distance.

Another example: higher education empowers its graduates to use logic, rhetoric, research, and the prestige of the master's degree to counter and overwhelm those with only eighth-grade educations from underfunded inner-city schools. Those with the graduate education have their own interests to protect, their own goals to meet, their own patrons and employers to satisfy, their own politicians to enthrall. They may not argue as well from the heart as the victims of bad public education would, but the former will outargue the latter by the rules of the game in American political life.

Women have long made the case that at least until recently, men held positions, brought experience, and could draw on past cases to outargue women who were denied such positions and opportunities. As women gained more employment outside the home, more experience in the working world, and more higher education, their arguments improved significantly, and they won more.

In those three examples, there had to be a winner. And the winner was determined by who could buy the most votes, sell the most policies, and determine the favored approaches to living.

Argument can take forms that, at the expense of the weak, merely guarantee more power to the powerful. Seeking to convince, convert, or defeat others, arguments often serve simply to humiliate, silence, or exclude. We have all seen attorneys, either in person or on television, staying within the rules of the game—a good judge will ensure that—and yet using experience, license, and convention to bully poor, undereducated, inarticulate victims of abuse who seek a forum for justice in the light of their complaints.

Sometimes argument boggs down midcourse; opponents weary of fighting but are no closer to closure. This results in resentful publics and unmet problems. This kind of thing we have seen in the prolonged legislative debates over abortion policies. The legislators and the public cannot avoid argument. Abortion rights and limits to abortion have to be settled by law, and lawmakers have to be convinced by lobbyists or convince each other. Yet they can stalemate, and few try to think of fresh approaches to social problems related to abortion or its prohibition.

Upon reaching a stalemate, both sides can "agree to disagree" on one subject so that they can move on and deal with other matters, or they may simply retreat to permanent warring camps. Either way, the argument remains unresolved, and progress toward the common good screeches to a halt.

On many contemporary issues, Americans find that their arguments have led to unbudgeable roadblocks. Publics are indeed "locked" together in argument, but not the civil kind envisioned by Father Murray. Instead, publics are at loggerheads, locked into alienating positions, unable to convert or defeat opponents and left to shout contending truths at one another. If a republic cannot thrive without argument, it clearly cannot thrive on argument alone.

Let's Have a Conversation

A conversation, wrote theologian David Tracy, "is not a confrontation. It is not a debate. It is not an exam. It is questioning itself. It is a willingness to follow the question wherever it may go." Although argument often unfairly privileges certain sides over others, true conversation is more likely to occur between equals. If the nature of argument is determined by competing truth propositions, the character of conversation is determined by the questions asked. David Tracy has much to teach us about conversation. In Pluralism
and Ambiguity, he explains that "the movement in conversation is questioning itself. Neither my present opinions on the question nor the . . . original response to the question, but the question itself, must control every conversation."  

Tracy has much more to say on the nature of conversation. It is "a game," he says, "with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it."  

Conversation takes on the character of a game and relies on surprise and on unexpected insights and unanticipated resources from the other side. Conversation encourages risk, allows for experiment, and promises fresh angles of vision. A civil order, we believe, needs much more than argument. America can prosper only if citizens learn to participate in conversation with one another.

Now That We're Talking, What Are We Talking About?

This book makes several claims about religion and American political life. Readers, of course, can agree or disagree with them and leave it at that. But rather than merely accepting or rejecting our argument, we hope you will read this book as a sincere invitation to conversation. We offer the following theses to stimulate conversation, and we expect—and welcome—agreement and disagreement alike.

1. Public religion can be dangerous; it should be handled with care.
2. Public religion can and does contribute to the common good.
3. Individual citizens energized by an awareness of possibilities based on their beliefs and the effects of those beliefs provide hope for improving the republic.

4. Traditional institutions—congregations, denominations, and ecumenical agencies—provide an effective public voice for religious people, but the political power of such groups has declined.
5. For the foreseeable future, religious people will most commonly funnel their political energies into special-interest groups, voluntary associations, and parachurch organizations.
6. It is important for the common good for religious people to join the political conversation—and get involved.

In the chapters in this book, we will explain these points in greater depth. The chapters of this book report on and derive from several formal conversations on a variety of themes related to politics and religion. Some themes were brought up at more than one of the consultations. Thus, to inspire study and conversation in the different kinds of groups that will be drawn to discuss the separate chapters, those issues and motifs also appear in more than one chapter here. Let the conversation begin!