

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Don't dodge controversy; engage it with civility

Kyle Kooyers

Program manager, Kaufman Interfaith Institute

"Well, we'll just have to agree to disagree."

This phrase is one that we've heard or said countless times. It comes up around dinner tables and small group discussions as a rip cord for mitigating the descent into the discomfort, disorientation and frustration associated with disagreement. I've even seen this as a rule for dialogue spaces as a means to avoid argument and ensure that tempers don't reach a boiling point as two perspectives come in contact with one another.

But is it enough? Is it really a satisfactory resolution for anyone looking to truly dialogue?

"Agree to disagree" seems to me like resignation into a conversational (or argumentative) stalemate. You and I are sharing conflicting points of views, and neither one of us is able to sway the other to realize the "truth" of our positions. So we, in mild resentment and disgust, simply say, "Well, we'll just have to agree to disagree." We have come up against an impasse of ideas, so we abandon the marathon exchange altogether because we can't reach a finish line; neither one of us can win.

On the night of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, while doing "The Late Show" and simultaneously watching the results come in, host Stephen Colbert noted Pew research that showed more than half of the Democrats (55 percent) say the Republican



Kyle Kooyers, program manager for the Kaufman Interfaith Institute

Party makes them afraid, while 49 percent of Republicans say the same about the Democratic Party.

He remarked, "Both sides are terrified of the other side. Maybe that's why our voting booths have a curtain — so you can have a place to hide after the election is over."

"So, how did our politics get so poisonous?" he asked. "Maybe we overdosed. We drank too much of the poison. ... You take a little bit of it so you can hate the other side. And it tastes kind of good. And you like how it feels. And there is a gentle high to the condemnation. And you know you are right."

ENJOYING SENSE OF SUPERIORITY

We allow ourselves to be afraid of people who are different, even hate them, because there is a "gentle high" we find in condemning them. But there can also be a high in our desire to "win," to be right, without any thought of the consequences.

In our dialogue spaces, the consequences of trying to "win" are very real. Amid my fears and anxiety; amid my trying to win you over to my side; amid my discomfort, disorientation, and frustration associated with disagreement, I lose sight of you as a person.

I all too often become so enamored with my own self-righteousness, that I, in fact, have it — politics, faith, reason, morality — all figured out, and I know so precisely how it ought to be lived out, that I entrench myself in the issues at hand and lose sight of others, as people, around me.

Pope John Paul II, in his book, "Love and Responsibility," offers us this: "There is no dignity when the human dimension is eliminated from the person."

FIND REWARDS IN DISAGREEMENT

Amid all of our positions, all of our "having it all figured out" and condemning those who think otherwise, we have seen far too little of each other. We have become unable to see or learn from the humans around us.

There is no doubt that we disagree. There is no doubt that our theological claims, our spiritual journeys and cultural traditions are very different. But that difference ought not be overlooked or ignored simply because we think it is satisfying in the moment. True dialogue, like any relationship, is nuanced and complex, challenging and deeply rewarding.

Interfaith Youth Core, in its "10 Guidelines for Brave Space Dialogue," states, "When we agree to disagree, difference is not engaged and is instead dismissed — therefore, no learning actually occurs." Instead of the old default — Agree to Disagree — they propose what we in the interfaith world call "controversy with civility." As Interfaith Youth Core

observes, "Allowing controversy with civility means that opposing viewpoints can be engaged respectfully as means to learning from one another."

This doesn't mean that I have to agree with or accept your perspective as true for me. Nor does it assume my perspective or experience ought to be true for you — and I say that as someone who loves to share my faith with other people. Rather, it welcomes us into a place of respectful inquisitiveness — "Do you pray? What does prayer or meditation look like for you? May I share with you what prayer looks like for me and why I find it such an important part of my day?"

We have the opportunity to learn about one another, to learn what each other believes or holds to be true, and to learn how those views, principles or ideas impact our everyday lives. In this way, we really begin to experience the beauty of one another. That's how we win.

When turning our faces to one another, when we stand alongside of each other, with empathy and solidarity, when we ask questions and we listen to each other's answers, we become known. We become real to each other. We see each other as whole persons — as humans. Then the craziest thing might happen. We might actually desire each other's company ... yes, even those with whom we disagree. Now I can agree to that!

interfaith@gvsu.edu