

"Evangelicals Reach Out"

By Os Guinness

A terrible question now stalks this land: Who will step forward to lead America forward out of the bitterness and divisions over race and over religion in public life? Race is the older problem, and to Americans stands as class does for the English – an abiding curse that has not healed and will not go away. Religion in public life is the newer challenge. Once thought settled through what James Madison called "the true remedy," it has degenerated sharply with the endless controversies of the past generation. Both race and religion require healing and civility for their resolution, but in the present bitter climate, each has been used to exacerbate the other and civility has been shouldered aside as weak and ineffectual.

Who, then, will deliver the Gettysburg Address of the American "culture wars"? This challenge must ultimately be shouldered by a leader of national stature. But at a humbler level, each faith community can step forward, reach out to people of all other faiths, and propose a vision of civility in public life that does justice to the problem of living with each others' deepest differences. American Evangelicals might seem an unlikely source of such a possibility. Recently they have been viewed as the problem, not the answer. But a newly published declaration represents just such a promising offer.

An Evangelical Manifesto is a proposal for a "civil public square" as one of its two main purposes. Written by a representative group of Evangelicals, it addresses the confusions within Evangelicalism and consternation without, and re-affirms what Evangelical means and who Evangelicals are. Then, having called for urgently needed internal reform, it sets out a vision of civil public life that is just and free for people of all faiths and no faith. Herein lies its promise – if adherents of other faiths, religious and secularist, embrace the offer and join hands to work together for a restoration of civility at a critical moment in American and world history.

The main themes of such a vision are plain. First, the core challenge is not simply an American problem but a global challenge: How do we live with our deepest differences, especially when those differences are religious, racial, and ideological? More abstract sounding than global warming, HIV-AIDS, and terrorism, this is a titanic problem to which no nation in the global era is immune, and certainly not "a nation of nations" such as America.

Second, each of the three great Western settlements of the issues of religion and public life – the French, the English, and the American – shows signs of strain and needs its first principles renegotiated in light of contemporary social challenges. In the case of the American settlement, which is the most nearly

perfect of the three, the factors behind the culture wars are clear: an exploding pluralism, reinforced by conflicting views of constitutional interpretation that has skewed the founders' brilliant understanding of the separation of church and state.

Third, the culture wars have thrown up two broad extremes over the last generation. Both are embodied in movements that are well-funded, nationally led, and receive passionate, though limited popular support. On one side is a vision of a sacred public square, in which one religion or another is privileged, though not established, associated for better or worse with the religious right. On the other side is a vision of a naked public square, in which all religions and religious symbols are excluded from public life. It is now evident that neither of these extremes lives up the promise of the founders' provisions and neither is just and workable for all Americans. To continue the present course of the culture warring is to invite controversies and law suits without end, and to undermine America's greatest achievement and one of America's great lessons for the world: the way in which *E pluribus unum* has become a reality and not just a motto.

Fourth, the answer to these extremes and to the culture wars at large lies in the restoration of a civil and cosmopolitan public square. This is an understanding of public life in which citizens of all faiths – and none – are free to enter and engage public life on the basis of their faith, but within a framework of what is agreed to be just and free for people of all other faiths too. Such a view of civility is not a matter of niceness, squeamishness about giving offense, or an item in freshman sensitivity training. Nor is it a search for an inter-faith dialogue or lowest common denominator unity that glosses over differences. Rather, it is a framework in which differences are taken seriously, conflicts are debated robustly, and policy decided civilly, something that is both a republican virtue and a democratic necessity.

Will this proposal receive a positive response from other Evangelicals, other Christians, and people of other faiths? Or will the offer itself be politicized and caught in the crossfire of the culture wars? My own passionate desire would be for Americans to face up to global realities, dig deep in their spiritual and historical resources, and work together for the possibility of a "new, new birth of freedom." A group of Evangelicals has stepped forward, and their good-faith offer goes out to other citizens. The world watches and waits to see if the "new order of the ages" can live up to its promise.

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