

BEYOND CIVILITY IN SOCIAL CONFLICT

How can one speak and act in ways that overcome entrenched social conflicts? In polarized societies, some insist that the survival of democracy depends on people abiding by rules of civility and mutual respect. Others argue that the political situation is so dire that one's values need to be fought for by any means necessary. Across the political spectrum, people feel like they need to choose between the morality of dialogue and the effectiveness of protest. *Beyond Civility in Social Conflict* makes an important intervention in this debate. Taking insights from nonviolent direct action, it provides a model for advocacy that is both compassionate and critical. Successful communicators can help their opponents by dismantling the illusions and unjust systems that impede human flourishing and pit people against one another. The final chapter turns specifically to Christian ethics, and what it means to “love your enemies” by disagreeing with them.

RUSSELL P. JOHNSON teaches religious studies and philosophy at the University of Chicago. He has published articles on political polarization, the philosophy of communication, and ethics in popular movies. His research analyses how “good guys versus bad guys” stories shape how we understand ourselves, imagine our enemies, and work for social change. *Beyond Civility in Social Conflict* is his first book.

Russell Johnson's work offers a long-needed companion to work within the fields of social conflict which analyzes the way in which speech contributes to or deforms justice within social relationships. Social conflict research frequently addresses the material conditions or the frameworks within which conflict can take place, but Johnson's inclusion of rhetoric within this field is a very welcome addition. He is extremely well-versed in the literature surrounding rhetoric and social conflict, and demonstrates here an exceptionally adept ability to construct an original rhetorical alternative. In both drawing on the insights of familiar figures, and integrating these into a coherent Christian ethical approach, he constructs a compelling alternative for effective rhetorical engagements.

*Myles Werntz, Associate Professor of Theology, Abilene Christian University,
co-author (with David C. Cramer) of A Field Guide to Christian*

Nonviolence (2022)

Contemporary public discourse is marked by recriminating speech that often prevents the possibility of collaborative struggle. In light of this wider context, Russell Johnson's compelling new book makes a much needed contribution to the field of Christian ethics that is both theoretically persuasive and practically useful. By focusing on the way we speak, not just the words we use, his approach invites deeper reflexivity and intention in our public engagement.

*Kyle Lambelet, Assistant Professor in the Practice of Theology and Ethics,
Candler School of Theology, Emory University, author of
;Present!: Nonviolent Politics and the Resurrection of the Dead (2020)*

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“New Cambridge Studies in Religion and Critical Thought” combines philosophical clarity, historical scholarship, and ethical inquiry into the study of religion, considering such questions as: What does a properly critical approach to “religion” or to particular religious traditions, practices, and ideas involve? What concepts might such an approach employ and how should these be understood? What are the political implications of taking such an approach – for religious studies and for the people studied therein? How should attention to race, class, gender, sexuality, capital, empire, and domination inform our assessment of religious traditions, institutions, and practices? The answers offered, while diverse in their methodologies, topics, and conclusions, are intended alike to be clear, precise, and historically attuned investigations of important subjects or figures in the study of religion and critical thought.

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*Beyond Civility in Social
Conflict*

Dialogue, Critique, and Religious
Ethics

Russell P. Johnson

University of Chicago



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For my parents

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Introduction

In polarized societies like the contemporary United States, communication seems both necessary and ineffective. We need passionate activism that can build coalitions, encourage cooperation, and challenge the myths that stand in the way of a more just social order. Silence favors those in positions of power; division favors the status quo. If society is to be reformed, let alone transformed, people will need to strengthen the bonds of fellowship that make democracy an effective check on totalitarianism.

The need for communication is evident, but actual communication between opposing groups seems fruitless. More than in recent memory, arguments seem to convince only those who already agree with the conclusion, and shared premises seem few and far between. Political advocacy tends to drive people further into their ideological camps. Like pressing on the gas pedal when your car is stuck in the mud, the more passionately we champion our viewpoints, the more mired we become in the inertia of polarization.

As I define it, polarization is not principally a matter of disagreement over policies. It is a social climate in which people perceive there to be two groups in zero-sum contention with one another. In polarized societies, individuals feel social pressure to identify with one of these groups and overcome the other, and this pressure inhibits critical reflection on what is actually true and just, as well as making it seem as though