

CONFERENCE REPORT
RELIGION IN PUBLIC SPHERE 2022
FEBRUARY 22-26, 2022
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Introduction

This four-day Strengthening Core Religions and Institutions in the Public Sphere (SCRIPS) conference was hosted by the Wheatley Institution and consisted of four roundtables discussing solutions to various problems concerning religious institutions in the public sphere and religious pluralism in a polarized age. At the end of the conference, each roundtable group proposed its project to unravel domestic problems in their community, one of which received \$1,000 from the Bellwether Fund to enact the project.

Keynote Speaker

Rabbi David Saperstein served as director of the Union for Reform Judaism's Religious Action Center for more than 30 years. He also served as the United States Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, served as the chair or co-chair of several national interreligious coalitions, and served as the first chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious freedom.

Rabbi Saperstein addressed the problems of pluralism in a polarized world, naming technology and media as the key challenges. He claimed that as technology grew, it increased the scale of polarization faster than any other form of communication in history. He taught that the ability to use technology ethically and religiously is the key to increasing human conscience and religious diversity. Rabbi Saperstein also claimed that polarization has caused greater harm than the American Civil War due to the mass spread of persecutions and violence against one's beliefs.

When asked about what the average person could do, Rabbi Saperstein recommended having multi-cooperation, multi-religious diversity, and understanding pluralism in regard to worship, practice, teaching, and sharing what religion means in public life. He claimed this has been one of the most fundamental keys to tackling hatred and persecution in America. One's rights are important, and religious practice is included in those rights. He ended by listing five significant criteria that people need in order to live in a more prosperous society:

1. Humans are created in a holy form connected to their dignity
2. None of us can claim merit over others because we are all equal before God
3. Freedom of choice is inherent in the human condition— freedom of conscience and freedom of religion
4. The Bible reflects the treatment of others because we are all being treated the same
5. Pluralism is not *Relativism*- meaning that it does not depend on what truth we know, but on the ability to live with every truth we know

Round Table Chairs

Kevin R. den Dulk is the Associate Provost of the Paul B. Henry Chair in Political Science at Calvin University. His scholarly work focuses primarily on how religion works through civil society to foster democratic citizenship, both in the United States and abroad.

James Patton is President and CEO of the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy. He explores the relationship between religious motives, religious actors, and critical areas of instability around the world, seeking ways to incorporate this key source of identity and motivation into strategies for reducing violent conflict.

Nadia Oweidat teaches history at Kansas State University. She has dedicated her research to identify strategies for promoting critical thinking, tolerance, and pluralism in the Middle East.

Andrew C. Reed teaches comparative religion and church history at BYU and is a Richard L. Evans Fellow of Religious Outreach. He focuses on the history of relations among Jews, Christians, and Muslims and recently researched human rights and religious freedom in Eastern Europe.

Round Table Discussions

Fostering Civic Virtues in a Polarized Age: The Role of Civic Education

Kevin den Dulk

Discussion: If the body politic is only as good as its citizens, what makes a citizen “good”? In this time of deep polarization, declining trust, indifference, and even alienation, can our models of education help us answer the critical question of how to form citizens for democratic self-government? How do knowledge and skills, but also civic virtues, help democratic citizens make decisions across lines of difference? How might the need for trust, reciprocity, tolerance, – and, importantly -- a disposition of hospitality shape our models of civic education?

Thomas Nebeker attended this round table and had a fantastic experience. There were ten people in Dr. Den Dulk’s group and he split them up into two groups, one with four people and the other with six. These two groups would each have their own separate presentations at the conclusion of the conference. Dr. Den Dulk’s round table discussions were organized into four to six-hour brainstorming sessions. In these sessions, the groups talked about where in society they saw problems related to civic education. These discussions were academically intense and vigorous. It was not until the night before the group presentations, at 9 P.M., after a 15-hour session, that Nebeker’s group finally decided on an idea.

His group tackled the problem of voter accessibility on Native American reservations. This problem was proposed by Nebeker and is a substantial problem for many Native Americans. Nebeker’s group proposed that Native American voters living on reservations could get better accessibility through higher registration rates and Mail Drop box locations. After all

the round table groups had presented their project proposals, Nebeker's team was chosen to receive the \$1,000 stipend and mentorship from the Bellwether Fund.

Theological Disinformation: The Limits of Tolerance in a Pluralist Society
James Patton

Discussion: The United States has long been a leader in legal and philosophical commitments to pluralism and freedom of conscience. Paradoxically, however, absolute religious tolerance implies the acceptance of beliefs that are fundamentally intolerant on certain matters. How should society respond when religious convictions and mandates cross the line into violating the liberties and rights of others?

Islamic Pluralism in a Polarized World
Nadia Oweidat

Discussion: Is there an inherent tension between Islam and modern pluralism? How does polarization manifest inside Muslim communities? How does one maintain faith in a pluralistic society? In an increasingly globalized, pluralistic yet polarized world, how do we contribute to tolerance and non-violent engagements with the "other"? Is violent extremism the embodiment of polarization in Muslim communities?

Religious Pluralism on Main Street: Civic Engagement as a Balm for Polarization
Andrew Reed

Discussion: Religious Pluralism is not always an inherent religious value among people of faith. Conflict (in many forms) often reinforces boundaries of identification among religious groups. In the contemporary American context, the struggle for productive civic engagement across religious lines has sometimes driven further wedges between communities and, at other times, opened up new avenues of cooperation. Where has religious pluralism made inroads to local conflict resolution, and where might those paths lead us? How can civic engagement lead to good public policy?

Soktheavy Phouk participated in this roundtable discussion. She regarded it as a remarkable experience to get to know people from different backgrounds and experience talking about pluralism in general. Her group's discussion specifically focused on Religious Pluralism on Main Street: Civic Engagement as a Balm for Polarization. At the beginning of the discussion, Andrew Reed presented how society can be seen as polarized from various angles of the world. He then shared his experiences in working and teaching in at Brigham Young University– Provo about what we can do to improve an aspect of religious awareness within a close circle community. In addition, he further laid out strategies for participants in the roundtable discussion to discover the key issues caused by polarization and marginalization within their community so that they can transform these dilemmas into a strategic resolution.

After 2 hours of engaging discussion, Soktheavy's team came up with a problem and solution forming a project proposal. The project proposal focused on promoting pluralism by

inserting its lessons into the curriculum in seminaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The project would connect experts to evangelical leaders within a discussion of pluralism and encourage them to support pluralism as one of the beliefs they encounter.

Reflection

Thomas

At the end of this conference, the biggest takeaway that I learned was the reality and possibility of interfaith discussions, relationships, and unified efforts to work on pluralism in the world today and between our peers. The work that we do here at the Religious Freedom and Human Dignity Initiative is important and the work moves forward all the time. I am excited to move forward and work with the Bellwether Fund and see where our proposal will go.

Soktheavy

The conference was a lifetime experience for me. Even though the project proposal our team proposed did not get to be selected, we knew how to construct a project proposal. Additionally, I got to work with many intelligent university students from various parts of the U.S. who are passionate about the same topic as I am. It is to be acknowledged that the discussion and the process of producing one project proposal took weeks and months to be completed, yet it only took three days to finish during this conference; therefore, it was hectic yet an inspirational work. On the other hand, many attendees learned how to make an impact on their communities through this kind of activity. The experiences they learned and key points taken out of this conference would be beneficial for them in their future career and their societies as a whole. Overall, it was a great opportunity to go to the conference and it was remarkable to engage with the educated people and share my experiences with them.