

Title: A gentle plea for civility
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A terrible question now stalks this land: Who will step forward to lead America out of the bitterness and divisions over race and religion in public life?

Race is the older problem, and to Americans it 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. At the same time, each faith community can step forward, reach out to people of other faiths, and propose a vision of civility in public life.

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](#), released Wednesday, is, in part, a proposal for a civil public square. The statement addresses the confusions about evangelicalism within and the consternation without, and re-affirms what "evangelical" means and who evangelicals are.

Starting with an urgently needed internal reform, it then sets out a vision of civil public life that is just and free for people of all faiths and those of no faith. Herein lies its promise — but only if adherents of other faiths (or no faith) embrace the offer and join hands to work together for a restoration of civility at a critical moment in history.

The core problem 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? It sounds more abstract than, say, global warming or terrorism, yet it remains a titanic problem to which no nation in a global era is immune.

Here in America, the root causes behind the culture wars are clear: an exploding pluralism, reinforced by conflicting views of constitutional interpretation that have skewed the founders' brilliant understanding of the separation of church and state.

The culture wars have resulted in two broad extremes over the last generation.

On one side is a vision of a sacred public square, in which one religion or another is privileged (though not established) — usually 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.

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. It also undermines 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.

The answer to these extremes lies in the restoration of a civil and cosmopolitan public square. Such a place would allow citizens of all faiths or not faith to freely engage public life on the basis of their faith, but within a framework of what is agreed to be just and free everyone else.

This view of civility is not a matter of niceness, or our squeamishness about giving offense, or a part of some kind of sensitivity training. Nor is it a search for interfaith dialogue or a lowest-common-denominator unity that glosses over differences.

Instead, it is a framework in which differences are taken seriously. Conflicts are debated robustly. Policy is decided civilly.

The question is now how this proposal will be received by other evangelicals, other Christians and people of other faiths. The offer itself be may be politicized and caught in the crossfire of the culture wars.

Yet Americans, it seems to me, must face up to global realities, dig deep in their cultural and historical resources, and work together for the possibility of a new birth of freedom. We evangelicals have stepped forward, and our good-faith offer goes out to other citizens.

The world watches and waits to see if this *Novus Ordo Seclorum* — this "new order of the ages" that is imprinted on our national seal — can live up to its promise.

Os Guinness, an author and social critic, is one of the drafters of An Evangelical Manifesto. His most recent book is The Case for Civility — and Why Our Future Depends on It.