

INDIANA WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY
NATIONAL CONVERSATIONS: A SERIES OF CIVIL DIALOGUES ABOUT SOCIETY'S
WELL-BEING

“Education in Crisis: The Unasked Questions”
Introductory Remarks, Dr. David Wright

The National Press Club, First Amendment Room
Washington, D.C.
October 21, 2010

Thanks to all of you for joining us for this special evening of fellowship. We are committed to this National Conversations project, and we realize that any project like this is only as good as the people who make it possible. I hope you've enjoyed yourselves this evening, and will enjoy the day tomorrow.

I would like to thank some key individuals and organizations: President Henry Smith; Jerry Pattengale; Jay Hein and the Sagamore Institute; and Scott Jaschik of Inside Higher Ed.

THE PRIVILEGES AND DUTIES OF CITIZENSHIP

It seems fitting for a group such as ours to meet this evening in the First Amendment Room of the National Press Club.

You're no doubt aware that some candidates for public office got into a bit of difficulty recently over remarks about the First Amendment. I don't want to invite any undue interrogation, so I'll be careful about my remarks.

But I was curious about the First Amendment's history, so I did a little research. You'll remember I'm sure – I did not – that in 1789, two years after the creation of the U.S. Constitution, James Madison led the U.S. Congress in crafting the First Amendment. They met in New York City beginning on March 4, 1789, to draft and approve what has become our Bill of Rights.

The process took months. The [record](#) shows a long list of proposed wordings for the first amendment¹:

On June 7, James Madison framed it as: *"The Civil Rights of none shall be abridged on account of religious belief or worship, nor shall any national religion be established, nor shall the full and equal rights of conscience be in any manner, nor on any pretext infringed. No state shall violate the equal rights of conscience or the freedom of the press, or the trial by jury in criminal cases."*

More than a month later, on July 28, a House Select Committee distilled it further: *"No religion shall be established by law, nor shall the equal rights of conscience be infringed."*

On Aug. 15, Samuel Livermore suggested: *"Congress shall make no laws touching religion, or infringing the rights of conscience."*

Next, the House, moved by Fisher Ames, offered on Aug. 20: "*Congress shall make no law establishing religion, or to prevent the free exercise thereof, or to infringe the rights of conscience.*"

The Senate version, offered on Sept. 3, read: "*Congress shall make no law establishing religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.*"

Six days later, on Sept. 9, they amended it to read: "*Congress shall make no law establishing articles of faith or a mode of worship, or prohibiting the free exercise of religion.*"

Later, a conference committee suggested: "*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.*"

And the House of Representatives accepted the final wording on Sept. 4 of that year, and the *Senate* on Sept. 25. The states ratified it in 1791.

The language readsⁱⁱ:

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

With this Amendment, in words unchanged for over 200 years, now the oldest continuously used national constitution in the world, the U.S. Congress enshrined five freedoms that are at the heart of our democracy: Freedom of religion; freedom of speech; freedom of the press; freedom of peaceful assembly; and freedom to petition the government for redress of grievances.

It seems fitting, then, that a university — especially a university with the mission of Indiana Wesleyan University — should convene in the First Amendment Room to prepare for a discussion of one of our nation's most pressing current issues: the education of our children, our young adult and our adult citizens.

As Thomas Jefferson once said, "A democracy cannot be both ignorant and free."

Those of us who enjoy the benefits of democracy must also accept the privilege and price of that freedom. Perhaps the pinnacle of those obligations is reached when young men and women give their lives in military service to our nation.

But there are other obligations as well. And perhaps those obligations, in their own way, may be harder to sustain because they are more mundane. They must be lived out day by day, amid the bombardment, not of guns and missiles, but of warring words and ideas and personalities.

Thomas Jefferson's remark reminds us that the freedoms we now enjoy, and the lifestyle we pursue, rest on the careful exercise of foundational principles and practices:

- The pursuit of truth through informed, disciplined discussion and debate;

- The presumption of mutual respect for our fellow citizens with whom we are engaged in that pursuit;
- The ability to make common cause even with those of different opinions, in pursuit of the good of our commonwealth; and
- Courageous action in the face of those who would deny or destroy these freedoms by force, by intimidation or by deceit.

Our national discourse has become fractured and polarized.

And yet we do not face more difficult challenges than our mothers and fathers faced before us. Nor does our body politic espouse more divergent or more strongly held opinions than our forebears encountered in their days.

Out of their tumult, they created and nurtured a nation dedicated to democracy, to freedom and to the highest ideals of human life.

They built a nation that, despite its faults, became the destination for millions of the world's citizens who have aspired to freedom and opportunity. They laid the foundation for an economy that became the greatest the world has seen. They nurtured the creation of an educational system that became the envy of the world. They shepherded the creation of a society filled with great religious and charitable institutions that continue to serve the nation and the world.

The conditions we face today are not more difficult than those faced by our forebears. Our circumstances do not absolve us of the obligations of our citizenship. In fact, I believe we face today the necessary conditions for a new generation of greatness – greatness of spirit, of insight and of action.

THE UNIVERSITY AND THE PUBLIC SQUARE

Two years ago, I began to ask how a private university, one that publicly claims to be centered on the person and values of Jesus, might serve our society as we wrestle with the great questions and issues of our day.

Our universities and colleges are some of the great treasures of our nation. They are widely viewed as our repositories of knowledge and insight. I have long favored Edward Shils' definition of our civic duty.

“Universities have a distinctive task. It is the methodical discovery and the teaching of truths about serious and important things There is abroad today a desire . . . to derogate or even to dissolve the idea that truths can be discovered and taught.

Denial of the possibility of detachment, denial of the possibility of the disciplined and disinterested search for knowledge, denial of the possibility of objective knowledge, which is true independently of the passions or desires or ‘material interests’ of the discoverer and transmitter have become more common in recent years in certain influential circles of academics.”ⁱⁱⁱ

These are very old-fashioned opinions. Nevertheless, despite the epidemic ennui of spirit that surrenders truth to the passing fancies of private opinion, Shils reminds us that we are charged with the distinctive task of discovering and teaching truths about life's serious and important matters.

And this brings us to the project that is the reason for our gathering.

This project sometimes appears to me to be a humble thing – to aspire to convene serious, disciplined, irenic conversations about the pressing issues of our day. But that is what we have set out to do.

We seek to serve by convening a series of civil dialogues about society's wellbeing.

These dialogues reflect the service orientation of our university's mission, rooted in our loyalty to the person of Jesus Christ.

Indiana Wesleyan University is a Christ-centered academic community, committed to changing the world, by development students in character, scholarship, and leadership.

We are well aware that not everyone shares our particular motivation of loyalty to the person and values of Jesus. But we believe that the best interests of our community and of our nation are served when fellow citizens people of differing but equally treasured motivations and opinions sit together to discuss difficult questions, and to discover the mutual ground that can yield fruitful solutions to vexing problems.

Our hope is that these national conversations will both embody the best traits of our national character, and honor the One we take as our model of service to the world – that they will be incisive, penetrating, tough-minded, enlightening, and honest – but that they will also be hopeful, peace-making, fair-minded, respectful and inspiring.

We hope that our panelists and observers alike — and perhaps most importantly, our own students — may find in these national conversations points of contact through which to make common cause, even amid differences of perspective and conviction.

In his wonderful book on the soul of the academic vocation, Chris Anderson talks about teaching his students in a state university to read the works of the great Catholic theologian, St. Augustine^{iv}.

He says “That’s what universities do, after all: They teach us how to read.”^v

Each of us must learn to read the narratives of our own lives. And we must learn to discern the meaning of the unfolding narrative of our national and global contexts.

And, in this reading, we seek to understand the great issues that constrain our aspirations that overshadow our dreams, that call from us either great insight and heroism, or that drive us into withdrawal, strife and despair.

Our task is to learn to read the text of our days, and to order our personal and corporate worlds rightly on the basis of that reading. These are, it seems to me, the skills that enable the democratic discourse that lies at the heart of a great and free democracy.

This is what we hope to enable, in some measure, through our National Conversations series.

Recently Nancy Thomas and Ann Marie Bahr wrote, “Higher education has been handed an opportunity to model exemplary practices in democratic discourse and social action, and in so doing, to demonstrate its worth to society in ways that go beyond facilitating economic and personal gain for individuals. Here is an opportunity, should [we] decide to accept it, to ponder anew fundamental questions about [our life together as citizens with our own convictions, our own needs, our own perspectives.]^{vi}

This is our aspiration for these National Conversations. Thank you for joining us in this venture of inquiry and of hope.

ⁱ http://www.religioustolerance.org/amend_1.htm

ⁱⁱ Derek H. Davis, Religion and the Continental Congress 1774-1789: Contributions to Original Intent, Oxford University Press, 2000.

ⁱⁱⁱ Edward Shils, *The Academic Ethic*.

^{iv} Anderson, Chris. *Teaching As Believing*.

^v p. 112, Anderson’s *Teaching*.

^{vi} Nancy L. Thomas (Democracy Project, Director) and Ann Marie B. Bahr (South Dakota State University) in *Encountering Faith in the Classroom: Turning Difficult Discussions into Constructive Engagement*, Miriam Rosalyn Diamond, Ed. (Stylus, 2008).