

# Keynote Address by E.J. Dionne

*The Woodstock Theological Center inaugurated its program, "Public Discourse and the Common Good," on December 6, 1995. This new Woodstock program area provides a nonpartisan forum for exploring current topics in government and civil society. E.J. Dionne delivered the keynote address entitled "The State of Our Civil Union: Reflections Upon Public Discourse, American Values, and the Common Good." Dionne writes for the editorial page of The Washington Post, specializing in political issues. Prior to joining the Post he worked for The New York Times and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1986 for his Vatican coverage. From 1986-1989, he was the Times' chief national political correspondent and received another nomination for the Pulitzer Prize, this time for political coverage. Dionne graduated summa cum laude with a B.A. from Harvard University and as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University he received a doctorate in sociology. He is the author of Why Americans Hate Politics and They Only Look Dead: Why Progressives Will Dominate the Next Political Era. E.J. Dionne serves on the Woodstock Theological Center board of directors.*

Introduction. I am deeply honored to be asked to speak here, and as a good Catholic accustomed to having Jesuits tell me what to think, I am a little intimidated, too. I figure the real reason I'm here is not because I work for *The Washington Post* or write about politics or anything like that, but because I was educated by Benedictines, not Jesuits, and the Woodstock Center decided it was finally time to invoke the fairness doctrine.

Much of the work of the Woodstock Center is inspired by the great theologian Bernard Lonergan, and my friend Michael Lacey [of the Smithsonian's Woodrow Wilson Scholars Program] has taught me that Lonergan had four great transcendental precepts, as he called them. They are: be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, and be responsible. Those are good rules for any talk about politics, but also hard ones. I will try to add another one: be brief.

I would like to speak directly to several of the issues involved in the title I have been given: "The State of Our Civil Union: Reflections Upon Public Discourse, American Values and the Common Good." The first is the whole notion of a civic union and what those words—or, in the popular notion of the day, "civil society"—means.

The second relates to "public discourse" and what role my profession, the press, plays in creating or shaping the kind of political conversation we have. Finally, I'd like to ask whether, in a time of polarized politics, we have any hope of finding something that could be called the common good.

**C**IVIL SOCIETY. What frustrates many Americans, and perhaps especially American Catholics, in the current polarization, is that we shift back and forth between talk about individualism and individual rights on the one side and talk about common good on the other, as if these were contradictory notions. It is the essence of Catholic social teaching—and, my guess is, of the common sense view of most Americans—that far from being contradictory, the insistence on the dignity of each individual and the belief that all of us have obligations to the common good are complementary, not contradictory, notions.

Government vs. market? In an essay in a volume sponsored by the Woodstock Center a few years ago, Father David Hollenbach summarized Catholic social thought perfectly. "The blending of rights language and common good language in recent Catholic social thought is not a result of conceptual

confusion. It is the consequence of a clear-eyed vision of the human person whose dignity is social through and through." None of us can achieve his or her objectives and potential if we are coerced, whether by government or forces outside government. Yet all of us are inextricably social, with ties to our families, our friends, our neighbors, and our fellow citizens. We want to set our own course, but we also know that course involves obligations and commitments to others. Catholic social thought—and, again, the common sense of most people—sees those things as being aligned.

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on the one side and pure and simple individualism on the other. If given a choice between "government" or "private" solutions to social problems, many Americans instinctively opt for the "private." But in areas of social concern, they do not use the word "private" to refer to the free market or business; they mean instead the voluntary institutions that communities establish for themselves. They mean, in a term that has rightly become popular, "civil society." As the philosopher Benjamin Barber put it, "Civil society, or civic space, occupies the middle ground between government and the private sector." He went on: "It is not where we vote and it is not where we buy and sell; it is where we talk with neighbors about a crossing guard, plan a benefit for our community school, discuss how our church and synagogue can shelter the homeless, or organize a summer softball league for our children . . . Civil society is thus public without being coercive, voluntary without being privatized."

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By casting "government" and "the market" as the main mechanisms of social organization, the conventional political debate thus leaves out the most important institutions in people's lives—family, church, neighborhood,

workplace organizations, and a variety of other voluntary institutions ranging from sports clubs and youth groups to privately organized child-care centers and the loose fellowships created at taverns like *Cheers* of television fame. All are places where, as the theme song of *Cheers* tells us, everybody knows your name. The great flaw in the binary choice between government and the market was described brilliantly by the sociologist Alan Wolfe in his book *Whose Keeper?*: "The opposition between individual freedom and state authority that guides so much of contemporary political theory . . . is a false opposition. [C]ivil society, not the individual, is the better alternative to government in modern society."

Conservatives and progressives. Conservatives, both new and old, have done a good job of reminding us of the Progressives' sometimes excessive eagerness for replacing the mechanisms of private charity and communal responsibility—family, church and mutual assistance societies—with the often clumsier mechanisms of government. What conservatives, especially the new conservatives, refuse to recognize is the extent to which these organizations are effective precisely because they do *not* operate according to the logic of free markets, but according to an older moral logic that predated capitalism. As Wolfe points out, economic exchanges between friends are not the same as economic exchanges within the larger market—"friends can rely on their knowledge of one another and the trust they have developed to smooth over economic transactions." On the other hand, "if we organize all our social relations by the same logic we use in seeking a good

bargain, we cannot even have friends, for everyone else interferes with our ability to calculate conditions that maximize self-interest." Wolfe argues that capitalism has been successful so far because "it lived its first hundred years off the precapitalist morality it inherited from traditional religion and social structure."

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Solidarity, morality, and trust: the social bonds. Following Wolfe, one can begin to see how the moral crisis Americans are experiencing grows not simply from the "counter-cultural" or "permissive" ideas that developed in the 1960s. Its roots lie deeper, in a society built on individualistic and market values that steadily cut away the bonds of solidarity, morality, and trust. If profit is all that matters, film makers or music producers will not think twice about filling the marketplace with products that foster amoral or dysfunctional values among the young. If all personal ties between employer and employee are deemed to be "irrational" or "sentimental" when compared to the competitive needs of the marketplace, employers need not think at all about how work schedules might affect the ability of



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employees to rear their children or how cutbacks in medical coverage might affect their employees' lives. And if government gives no protection for those many employers who *do* care about such things, it risks forcing them out of business as they are undercut by competitors for whom cost and price are the only factors in business decisions. As David Broder has pointed out, one of the terrible ironies of the health care battle is that the *minority* of employers who do not offer health insurance took control of the political debate from the vast *majority* of businesses that do. A debate that might have been over how businesses and individuals might fairly share the obligations of providing help for the sick became instead a fight over government "compulsion," as if government itself had created the need for health insurance.

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The central irony of our time that so many of the new conservatives wish to avoid is this: *A capitalist society depends on non-capitalist values in order to hold together and prosper.* Adam Smith certainly recognized this. It is what Daniel Bell has referred to as "the cultural



*Inaugural dinner of Woodstock's Public Discourse Program held at Copley Formal Lounge, Georgetown University.  
From left: Randy Rainey, S.J., E.J. Dionne, James L. Connor, S.J.*

contradictions of capitalism." More recently, Francis Fukuyama has written of "the social virtues" behind "the creation of prosperity."

If the problem is cast this way, the purpose of Progressivism is not to use government to undermine the free market, but precisely the opposite: to create the social conditions in which the market can work well in its proper sphere. The Progressive's goal is not to strengthen government for government's sake, but to use government where possible to strengthen the institutions of civil society. Those institutions need protection against the state, but they also need protection from market forces. How, for example, can families be liberated from some of the pressures of the marketplace—through more "family-friendly" tax laws, through better rules on parental leave, through incentives to create more flexible workplaces so parents feel less conflicted between the obligations

of work and home? How can government policies strengthen rather than weaken the voluntary sector? Can the poor who live in public housing projects be given more control of their surroundings and a larger stake in their communities? Can rules be written so that employers who feel a sense of loyalty and obligation to their employees will not be punished by the marketplace? Given that the American charitable sector prospered for years on the unpaid labor of women volunteers, how can it be revitalized now that so many women both want and need to work for wages and salaries?

The role of government. As the communitarian thinker Philip Selznick puts it, the welfare state, like the market, can become "a bloodless repository of moral virtue." But "the alternative is not a rejection of government." Instead, he maintains, "it is for the architects of the welfare state to transform their vision of how governments



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fulfill their responsibilities . . . If the government will pay more attention to communal values and civil society, it will more clearly perceive and more adequately protect the needs of individual persons." And if supporters of adequate welfare provision seek less bureaucratic approaches, they could make the welfare state "more limited, more accountable and more humane."

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Progressives—liberals—thus need to embrace a politics of liberty and community. Government should not weaken the bonds of civil society. But government *can* step in to strengthen civil society and protect it against the disruptions created by the normal workings of the economic market. Surely anyone who claims to believe in "family values" should want to relieve families of some of the pressures placed upon them by work and economic distress. As Theodore Roosevelt put it: "No man"—he could have added woman—"can be a good citizen unless he has a wage more than sufficient to cover the bare costs of living, and hours of labor short enough so that after his day's work is done, he will have time and energy to bear his share in the management of the community, to help in carrying the general load."

**PUBLIC DISCOURSE.** The common good requires a clear, sensible and open debate—and here we get to the responsibilities of my profession, or, the press. As you may recall, following the Oklahoma bombing, an issue arose whether conservative politicians in the mainstream and talk show hosts might not at times have tolerated and perhaps even encouraged an extremist response to political problems by promoting a hostility toward the federal government that went well beyond "legitimate questions" about its size and scope. As Republican economist Herbert Stein asked shortly before the Oklahoma attack, was there not something dishonest and demagogic about casting "the government" and "the people" as enemies locked in fierce struggle when the government in question was democratic and when "the people," as they demonstrated in 1994, had every capacity to change it?

Speech in search of truth. But the real issue here involved more than the pronouncements of conservative politicians or talk show hosts. The armed right-wing represented in extreme form the great gulf that had grown between Washington and many in the rest of the country. They symbolized the popular sense that the day-to-day talk of politics—one element of public discourse—had little to do with what Americans actually worried about. The impatience with the nature of political talk could lead to extremism, but it also embodied a longing for what the political philosopher Glenn Tinder has called "the attentive society." The attentive society as he conceives it is a place that sees freedom as being of infinite value. But freedom is

understood by Tinder "as a pathway, not a destination." Understanding freedom in this way explains much of the impatience with so much of public speech—in journalism, in advertising, on television and in politics. "One reason freedom is degraded today," writes Tinder, "is that serious speech, which is *speech in search of truth*, is relatively rare. Freedom of speech is most energetically and conspicuously used for advertising and electioneering—for activities based on the assumption that speech is an expedient in the service of profits and power and that truth is an extreme outer limit rather than central purpose."

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Civil discourse and the common good. Applying Tinder's rigorous test—*speech in search of truth*—to day-to-day talk and writing in politics and journalism would have a revolutionary impact and would also contribute to the common good. Tinder, like Lasch and Dewey, sees public life not simply as a realm of combat but also as the ground on which citizens can engage in a common search for understanding. "A society in which people listen seriously to those with whom they fundamentally disagree—an attentive society—is the proper setting for freedom," Tinder believes. "An attentive society would provide room for



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strong convictions, but its defining characteristic would be a widespread willingness to give and receive assistance on the road to truth."

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Politics, in the Tinder formulation, is not simply about struggles for power and the defeat of adversaries. It is, in democratic countries at least, a continuous and ongoing effort to balance worthy but competing values, to mediate conflicts, to resolve disputes, to solve problems. For good or ill, politics shapes the context in which individuals must make choices. And this experience of social and political discourse both occurs in and helps shape the common good. Politics establishes the rules under which people will work, compete, raise their families, help their neighbors. If politics goes well, it engages citizens in the kind of debate that Tinder has in mind. It thus establishes rules that are seen broadly as fair and reasonable, partly because they have arisen out of an open dialogue, and partly because they are always subject to challenge and change. The result is a dynamic society. But if politics goes badly, the rules under which citizens must live come to be seen as unjust and distant from the values the society claims to espouse.

Citizens come to doubt the legitimacy of political and economic systems that preach one thing and reward another.

Politics and the common good. Politics, in other words, will be at the center of the country's efforts to navigate through the current moral and economic crises. There is no escaping politics because there is no escaping the fact that the rules established in government, the marketplace, the workplace and the neighborhood will powerfully influence what even the most individualistic souls will be able to do. Some rules will make it easier for families to raise their children; others will make that task more difficult. Some will make it easier for individuals to seize opportunities for education and advancement; others will get in the way. Some rules will encourage charity, generosity, community-mindedness; others will discourage them.

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Getting the rules right, the task for which Tinder's attentive society is well suited, is the precondition for creating a dynamic society. But getting the rules right cannot really occur unless all of us commit



*E.J. Dionne, Jr.*

ourselves to achieving a more comprehensive understanding of the common good.

Journalism, all by itself, is ill suited to creating a new society—or, for that matter, any kind of society. But good journalism, thoughtful commentary, engaging argument are all essential to the attentive society Tinder has in mind. And they are essential for the achievement of the common good as well. The mass media can enlighten or distract, engage or sedate, treat serious matters thoughtfully or trivialize them. Journalism is under such sharp attack now precisely because the public (and most journalists) suspect that it is not promoting a level of public debate that matches the seriousness of the choices the country confronts. The country is now engaged in one of the great arguments of its history, an argument in which many of the most basic questions—about definitions of morality, the role of government, the shape of the economy—are in play. If Americans in large numbers sit out this great debate and decide that politics has nothing to do with the problems at hand, and nothing to do with them, the whole political



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class—and perhaps *especially* journalists—will have failed.

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**I**S THERE A COMMON GOOD? But what must be asserted above all is that there is such a thing as the common good. Defining it will always be a matter of real contest and serious conflict. We ought not flinch from that. But

finding it will require an openness to arguments from the intellectual shores of our adversaries—an acceptance that, as Reinhold Niebuhr put it, it is important to recognize the errors in our own truths and the truths in the errors of our opponents. At this moment, what FDR said about politics applies also to our thinking about politics. “The country needs and, unless I mistake its temper, the country demands bold, persistent experimentation. It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something.” Here at the Woodstock Center, there is a determination to keep trying and a mood for bold, persistent, intellectual experimentation. This new Woodstock program which we inaugurate tonight—called “Public Discourse and the Common Good”—illustrates

the Jesuit commitment to that intellectual mission. Its first conference entitled “Welfare Reform, Federalism, and the Common Good” is intended to serve the country by bringing together knowledgeable welfare reform activists to seek a better understanding of the daunting problems that face us and the truth about the nature of the underlying conflicts. May God bless its efforts.

(Parts of this speech were taken from *They Only Look Dead: Why Progressives Will Dominate the Next Political Era*, by E.J. Dionne, Jr. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).)

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## Activities of the Fellows: April-June 1996

(continued from page 2)

with Harvard University Press for release this fall. All that remains is indexing and final proofreading of the typeset text. Tom began research on this book after completing *A Flock of Shepherds*, a study of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, in 1992. While waiting for his book to be copy-edited, Tom created a World Wide Web page on the Internet for the Woodstock Center: <http://guweb.georgetown.edu/woodstock/>. (See story on page 12.) He moderated a May 14 Woodstock Forum on “Election '96: The Values Behind the Issues.” Panelists of the forum were: Thomas B. Edsall, national correspondent for *The Washington Post*; Peter N. Skerry, visiting fellow, Governmental Studies Program, the Brookings Institution; and Mary McGrory, syndicated columnist for *The Washington Post*. The press, including BBC, German radio, UPI Radio, RNS, CNS, the *National Catholic Register*, the *National Catholic Reporter*, *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the *Economist*, and others continue to

seek out Father Reese for analysis and comment on issues touching the church.

J. Michael Stebbins went to Jefferson City in April to take part in a program, “Common Ground for the Common Good,” for social justice ministers from the four Missouri dioceses. He gave two keynote talks—one on “Human Needs and the Common Good,” the other on “The Common Good and Economic Justice”—and a workshop on the meaning of community. In mid-May he spent two weeks with executives at American Management Systems, Inc., in Fairfax, Virginia, and Sacramento, California, learning about how the company operates and how it deals with ethical concerns. At the end of the month he gave a keynote address on “Funding Issues for Catholic Agencies” in Oklahoma City to directors and program administrators of Catholic Charities from Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, and Oklahoma. In early June he responded to a paper on the topic of theological method at the annual convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America in San Diego.



# Public Discourse and the Common Good

*Father James L. Connor, S.J., director of the Woodstock Theological Center, recently interviewed Father R. Randall Rainey, S.J., about Woodstock's newest program area called "Public Discourse and the Common Good." Father Rainey coordinated the first day long conference of this program. The conference was entitled "Welfare Reform, Federalism, and the Common Good."*

Can you tell us something about this new program at Woodstock called "Public Discourse and the Common Good?" What, for instance, does "public discourse" mean?

"Public discourse" refers to the communication, whether written or oral, that goes on all the time among citizens at every level of society. It is the continuing conversation that both expresses and shapes our civic and political life together. Topics of this conversation will vary. They might focus on issues on the local level, like the quality of our schools or neighborhood crime. They might be national, like welfare reform, health care, abortion, or national debt. Whatever the issue, people invariably base their arguments on what they take to be the facts of the matter and then go on to propose policies or actions that express and promote the values they cherish. So our conversations contain a "vision" of the way things stand and the way they ought to be.

And what has this "public discourse" got to do with the "common good"—the other expression in the title of this new program?

Explicitly or implicitly public discourse is always trying to answer the question, "What is the good life for us and our neighbors?" Endowed by God with freedom, we have to decide the answer to that question in an intelligent, reasonable, and responsible way. In so doing, we determine the meaning and quality of our common life and our experience of the common good. Public discourse, in other words, is the means by which we answer the question: What is the good life for us? It is a relationship of means to end.

Is public discourse simply talking about the common good or does it include action as well?

Public discourse is closely linked to action: discourse leads to deliberation, deliberation leads to decision, and a decision becomes real in action. These unfolding steps are fundamentally connected.

So public discourse and the common good are intimately related to one another?

Right. Moreover, when responsible discourse—that is, discourse in service of the common good—is absent, or distorted, you'll have a society that's in decline. German society during the Nazi regime would be a good example. People were forbidden to engage in public discourse that might challenge their leaders' values. The recent dissolution of the Soviet Union is also a good example of how the common good had become distorted and how "public discourse" can do its job of effecting social change. Greater freedom of discourse led to massive changes. So, public

discourse is obviously more than "just talking."

I'd like to get clearer about just what "the common good" is.

Let me first say what the common good is not. It is not simply the sum of all the particular "goods" that each individual in society enjoys. By "goods" I mean things like food, shelter, clothing, particular joys and pleasures. You could "add up" all these goods and you still wouldn't have what we mean by "the common good." The common good is more than, deeper than, the "sum of the parts."

Well, if the common good is not the sum of particular goods, what in the world is it?

The common good is the concrete functioning structure of persons working together to produce what is best for the whole community, and therefore for the members of that community. The community might be a family, a basketball team, a symphony orchestra, a neighborhood, a city, a nation, a religious order, a business corporation, a law firm—any group of people that forms a community rooted in common interests, goals, convictions, commitments, loyalties, concerns, and so on.

Can you mention some features of this "common good?"

I'd like to, because it is not easy to understand the "common good." As I said, it's not the "sum of the parts of individual goods." You won't, for instance, get much of a rendition of Beethoven's Fifth (which is an orchestra's "common good") out of a group of musicians, each of whom decides to be the solo performer of the