# Healthy Conflict in Contemporary American Society

US citizens perceive their society to be one of the most diverse and religiously tolerant in the world today. Yet seemingly intractable religious intolerance and moral conflict abound throughout contemporary US public life – from abortion law battles, same-sex marriage, post-9/11 Islamophobia, public school curriculum controversies, to moral and religious dimensions of the Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street movements, and Tea Party populism. *Healthy Conflict in Contemporary American Society* develops an approach to democratic discourse and coalition-building across deep moral and religious divisions. Drawing on conflict transformation in peace studies, recent American pragmatist thought, and models of agonistic democracy, Jason Springs argues that, in circumstances riven with conflict between strong religious identities and deep moral and political commitments, productive engagement depends on thinking creatively about how to constructively utilize conflict and intolerance. The result is an approach oriented by the recognition of conflict as a constituent and life-giving feature of social and political relationships.

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# Healthy Conflict in Contemporary American Society

*From Enemy to Adversary*

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I say we had best look our times and lands searchingly in the face, like a physician diagnosing some deep disease. Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart than at present, and here in the United States. Genuine belief seems to have left us. The underlying principles of the States are not honestly believ'd in, (for all this hectic glow, and these melo-dramatic screamings,) nor is humanity itself believ'd in. What penetrating eye does not everywhere see through the mask?

The spectacle is appaling. We live in an atmosphere of hypocrisy throughout. The men believe not in the women, nor the women in the men. A scornful superciliousness rules in literature. The aim of all the *litterateurs* is to find something to make fun of. A lot of churches, sects, &c., the most dismal phantasms I know, usurp the name of religion. Conversation is a mass of [banter] ...

The depravity of the business classes of our country is not less than has been supposed, but infinitely greater. The official services of America, national, state, and municipal, in all their branches and departments, except the judiciary, are saturated in corruption, bribery, falsehood, maladministration; and the judiciary is tainted. The great cities reek with respectable as much as non-respectable robbery and scoundrelism. In fashionable life, flippancy, tepid amours, weak infidelism, small aims, or no aims at all, only to kill time. In business, (this all-devouring modern word, business,) the one sole object is, by any means, pecuniary gain. The magician's serpent in the fable ate up all the other serpents; and money-making is our magician's serpent, remaining to-day sole master of the field ...

I say that our New World democracy, however great a success in uplifting the masses out of their sloughs, in materialistic development, products, and in a certain highly-deceptive superficial popular intellectuality, is, so far, an almost complete failure in its social aspects, and in really grand religious, moral, literary, and esthetic results. In vain do we march with unprecedented strides to empire so colossal, outvying the antique, beyond Alexander's, beyond the proudest sway of Rome ... It is as if we were somehow being endow'd with a vast and more and more thoroughly-appointed body, and then left with little or no soul.

Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*

Of course, the old undying elements remain. The task is, to successfully adjust them to new combinations, our own days.

Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*

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# Introduction

United States (US) citizens perceive their society to be one of the most diverse and religiously tolerant in the world today. Yet seemingly intractable religious intolerance, and moral and political conflict abound throughout contemporary US public life. Even in the years before the election of President Donald J. Trump, studies showed divisions among US citizens by political affiliation as more oppositional than they had been in decades. The 2016 election cycle and first year of the Trump presidency only exacerbated these divisions. Antagonistic political hostilities no longer gravitate to the poles of the political spectrum. Political conflict and oppositional divisiveness affects even those who identify themselves in the middle of that spectrum, or self-identified "moderates." Moreover, both sides identify their opponents as not merely fellow citizens of differing political persuasions, but rather, as harboring political and religious commitments that threaten the very well-being of the country.[1] Through 2017, partisans expressed not just frustration with their opponents, but anger and fear of them.[2]

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[1] Pew Research Center, "Political Polarization in the American Public," June 12, 2014, www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/ (accessed August 28, 2017).

[2] Pew Research Center, "Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016: Highly Negative Views of the Opposing Party – and Its Members," June 22, 2016, www.people-press.org/2016/06/22/partisanship-and-political-animosity-in-2016/ (accessed August 28, 2017). Pew Research Center, "The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider," October 5, 2017, esp. 65–71, www.people-press.org/2017/10/05/the-partisan-divide-on-political-values-grows-even-wider/ (accessed November 22, 2017).

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This book develops an account of "healthy conflict" to intervene in allegedly intractable instances of political, religious, and moral intolerance in the contemporary United States. It combines the insights of recent pragmatist accounts of democratic social transformation, agonistic models of democratic engagement, and insights from the field of peace studies known as conflict transformation. In placing these resources in a mutually enriching conversation, this book offers a coherent approach to transforming religion-related conflict that sidesteps the self-subverting difficulties posed by standard accounts of "religious tolerance" and "conflict resolution." It provides a set of tools by which ethicists and religious thinkers, political philosophers, activists, and practice-minded peacebuilders might confront even the most severe, enduring forms of religiously or morally grounded conflict and intolerance.

Many approaches to conflict seek to resolve them by containing the differences in identities, passions, and commitments that fuel persistent conflict. The approach to "healthy conflict" developed here seeks instead to reframe and innovatively deploy the elements that give life to those conflicts. Instead of trying to solve the elements of persistent conflict, it reconceives them as resources that can be channeled to reduce violence and promote justice.

Chapter 1 appeals to "moral imagination" as a means of reframing apparently intractable conflicts born out of rigid identity oppositions. I first draw from the pragmatist philosopher and social critic Richard Rorty, who characterized moral imagination as the cultivation of empathetic sentimentality in order to promote mutual tolerance and overcome conflict. However, Rorty's position has provoked recent debates over both the strengths and dangers of appeals to moral imagination. It draws a powerful contrast with the work of literary critic Elaine Scarry. In tracing these debates, I consider the forms of persuasion and engagement that such sentimentality can inspire. I argue that such a focus on moral imagination can indeed reconceptualize conflict by mitigating the abstractness of human rights foundationalism on the one hand, while limiting the deconstructionist excesses of cultural theory and critique on the other. I ultimately suggest, however, that Rorty's position suffers from a crucial flaw: it tends to dismiss precisely those types of religiously motivated conflict and identity oppositions that Rorty says he aims to assuage with his appeals to mutual tolerance. This is because Rorty's approach fails to take the depth of identity-associated oppositions seriously enough, or to address their structural manifestations in the intersections of race, class, gender, and religious identities (among others).

In Chapter 2, I emphasize that moral imagination always develops within a web of relationships, even in the midst of persisting conflict. So conceived, interventions through literary moral imagination can reframe ways of seeing that help alter how rival groups habitually perceive one another. As a result, people who view each other in stark opposition might come to imagine themselves in mutual and empathetic relationships. Understood in this way, moral imagination enables a different mode of seeing and feeling in light of an empathetic understanding of those against which a group distinguishes itself.

Of course, practices of moral imagination do not simply eliminate the oppositions that engender conflict. Such oppositions typically run far too deep to be simply resolved. Nonetheless, moral imagination remains a powerful tool by which someone perceived to be an enemy to be destroyed could be reconceived as an opponent to be grappled with, and even learned from. On the account I develop, an adversary is an opponent one comes to recognize as deserving basic respect, care, and even empathy. Such an adversarial relationship should be characterized by reciprocal accountability and protection against arbitrary treatment, even if one's adversary nonetheless remains an opponent to be contested and resisted. On this account, empathy, imagination, and creativity are key to avoiding what is perhaps the greatest poison of all to healthy, productive conflict: the temptation to demonize and scapegoat one's opponent, positioning him or her as intrinsically evil and beyond the possibility of constructive engagement or future reconciliation – as no more than an enemy to be vanquished.

Here I build an account of moral imagination as an ethical practice aimed at the formation – or perhaps the reformation – of good habits and skills of imagination. What would be required in order to take the rigors of moral imagination with sufficient gravity? I take up in detail the case on which Rorty and Scarry initially agree – the case of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. After its initial society-altering impact at the time it was written, social and literary critics (most powerfully, James Baldwin) criticized Stowe's text as a failure of moral imagination regarding race in America. In the last half-century, however, feminist scholars and activists have retrieved the text and critically challenged that assessment. The encounter between these readings creates an instructive and generative tension. I offer a reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in light of this debate in order to demonstrate how Stowe's text displays both the limitations and the power of moral imagination to illuminate structural and cultural forms of violence, and to inspire transformational responses.

Chapter 3, building upon my revised account of moral imagination, tests this account against criticisms that such pragmatist approaches result in gradualist and ultimately superficial social change. Here I address the alleged incapacity of such an account of moral imagination to deal adequately with social evil and structural violence by examining the debate between Rorty and his former student Cornel West.

In contrast to Rorty, West's "prophetic pragmatism" challenges his fellow pragmatists to interrogate pervasive injustices and systemic evils, the structural conditions that permit some citizens to wield power over others in arbitrary and unaccountable ways. Perhaps the most pronounced feature of prophetic pragmatism is its hope-driven struggle for democratic transformation of injustice and conflict in the midst of persistent domination and tragic conditions. Prophetic pragmatists refer to this struggle as "hope against hope" or "tragic hope." A second central feature is its use of critical social theory for identifying the sometimes catastrophic proportions that such domination can take. A third feature I examine is prophetic pragmatism's reliance upon a "fugitive" model of democratic action as the means of resisting systemic injustice and suppression. I argue that grasping prophetic pragmatism helps explain West's increasingly activist work as a public philosopher and, in particular, his sustained interventions in such movements as Occupy Wall Street (2011–2013), Black Lives Matter (2013–), and the Movement for Black Lives (2016–) more broadly. More importantly, I also argue that a nuanced grasp of prophetic pragmatism is the only means by which we can adequately understand and account for West's fiercely prophetic criticisms of, and controversial resistance to, many of President Barack Obama's policies.

In Chapter 4, I examine in detail West's controversial opposition to several policies of the Obama administration. This contest exemplifies the ultimate import of the differences between Rorty's moral imagination and West's prophetic pragmatist mode of socio-theoretical critique, a difference further highlighted by the Black Lives Matter movement. I argue that West's interventions are more important than his critics allow. And yet, occasionally West risks tilting too far in the direction of relentless critique and righteous anger, thus sometimes failing fully to enact the virtues of moral imagination. As a result, at times his indispensable efforts suffered from some excesses of prophetic rage. West's prophetic pragmatism exemplifies the challenging opposition between moral imagination and critique. Though he recognizes the indispensability of the former, he is sometimes inclined to overemphasize the latter. Yet it is necessary to

mediate this opposition in order to address constructively conflict and antagonisms embedded in structural and cultural forms of violence, and which constitute the tragic dimensions of American society (the inevitable limitations of human agency, forced choices between irreconcilable goods, confronting recurrent forms of evil). Thus, in Chapter 5, I conduct an exposition of "the prophetic" at the heart of prophetic pragmatism. In a contemporary political context rife with the rhetoric of categorical indictment and denunciation between parties in conflict, conceptualizing prophetic rhetoric is as urgent a task as it is indispensable for developing a model of healthy conflict. My claim in this chapter is that, contrary to popular perception, from the vantage point afforded by prophetic pragmatism, contemporary public life does not suffer from a glut of prophetic criticism but, rather, a deficiency of it.

Having analyzed two of the most influential contemporary pragmatist visions of democratic social transformation in the first five chapters, I turn next to show their implications for conflict transformation. I demonstrate how they help illumine structural forms of domination, possibilities for critical resistance, and practical action for change. In Chapter 6, I propose a model of practical agency and concrete engagement for effecting democratic transformation in deadlocked political conditions and "culture war" religious intolerance. Here I add to this unfolding conversation pragmatist philosopher Robert Brandom's account of expressive freedom to examine the apparent opposition between theoretical critique and democratic activism. On the account of agency that I develop, the integration of moral imagination and socio-theoretical critique allows for more than simply illuminating and resisting the dynamics of domination. Those dynamics – and the conflict they produce – can be altered and transformed. This strategy thus moves beyond Rorty's tendencies toward romantic quietism as well as West's temptation to theoretical excess.

I employ Brandom's model of inferential pragmatism to show its potential for prompting democratic social transformation. At the same time, I place his inferential pragmatism in critical dialogue with Michel Foucault, an unlikely candidate to mediate the theory–practice opposition. Foucault, after all, is widely considered to exemplify the paralysis of critique and the excesses of theory. Yet the mutually corrective conversation between Brandom and Foucault displays the pragmatist concern to transform injustice at its most refined. This critical exchange lays the groundwork for the constructive accounts of "agonistic respect," "healthy conflict," and "strenuous pluralism" in contexts of protracted intolerance and incivility that I set forth in Chapters 7–9.

To this point – the end of Part I – I have explored a number of recent ethical and philosophical attempts to constructively engage intractable conflicts in contemporary public life (e.g., recent pragmatist accounts of moral imagination and critique, accounts of prophetic criticism, and agonistic proposals of democratic practice). In Part II, I integrate these resources in a positive account of "healthy conflict" and "strenuous pluralism" in contexts of intransigent religious conflict. Here I bring conflict transformation insights from peace studies into conversation with the resources for democratic social transformation I have cobbled together so far.

With the tools of moral imagination, prophetic critique, and expressive freedom in place, Chapter 7 explores the possibility that morally and religiously grounded intolerance and conflict might become resources for positive political and social change. I begin by intervening in recent debates among political philosophers and religious ethicists about how to accommodate intolerant religious voices and actors in political discourse. These debates demonstrate the necessity of accommodating wide degrees of religion-specific reasoning, practice, and speech in liberal-democratic political discourse. But even such accommodation runs up against limits. Ultimately, I argue, accommodationist principles tend to exclude the most disruptive and intolerant forms of religion in public life. But these often involve precisely those actors who understand their religious and moral claims to be nonnegotiable, and even demanding resistance to, or substantial transformation, of the public sphere. Accommodation of such voices in public life – in effect, allowing them "permission" to participate – tends to elicit antipathy at being domesticated or discursively policed in exchange for approval to participate in the first place. I explore several cases where this has occurred.

Rather than advocating straightforward accommodation or appealing to mutual understanding, I explore the potential goods of forthright conflict that come into view when we recognize the full depth – and perhaps irremediability – of intolerance. I critically reevaluate the broadly shared presupposition that tolerance is key to addressing conflict generally, and religiously motivated conflict in particular. I argue that "tolerance" – understood as a means of resolving or containing conflict through the principled allowance of a range of incompatible religious, moral, and political views (or as dispositions to "put up with" or to "live and let live") – can risk perpetuating, even aggravating, the very forms of conflict and opposition that it is supposed to contain or resolve.

I do not argue that intolerance is good or that tumultuous political encounters are better than tranquil ones. I appreciate tranquility as much as everyone else. I argue, however, that tranquility is not a feasible path to a just and transformative approach to intractable conflicts. Instead, I examine the potential of agonistic pluralism as an effective response to intransigent conflict. This approach, I argue, finally suffers from certain of the same shortcomings as the accommodationist and recognition-based approaches. Still, the model of agonistic pluralism helps us to conceptually reframe religious intolerance and conflict. In particular, it adds the notion of "agonistic respect," the practice of reconceiving a potential enemy to be destroyed as an adversary to be contested – though also respected and cared for. This approach, I suggest, generates a workable strategy for constructively deploying the elements of conflicts that are liable to be intransigent.

Although the case for inclusion of religion-specific practices within liberal democracy has been successful at the level of scholarly debates, questions persist as to whether the expanded conception of democratic inclusion proves viable amid the religious intolerance of contemporary US public life. On-the-ground realities continue to tempt analysts to frame current conditions either as irreparably fragmented or tragically ineffective, suggesting that existing democratic practices cannot mediate deep and persistent conflict. In Chapter 8, I argue that the hope for democratic discourse and coalition-building across deep – potentially irreconcilable – moral and religious divisions in US public life depends less on continuing calls for "more tolerance" than on finding ways to constructively utilize conflict and intolerance. Is it possible to distinguish between constructive and destructive forms of intolerance? If so, can we reorient theorizing about democratic practices and processes so that what seems to be simple intolerance (and thus a candidate for marginalization or exclusion from political processes) might instead be used to constructively transform those practices and processes? Further, what would an analytical framework that cultivated "healthy conflict" look like? How would such an approach facilitate concrete efforts to transform religiously motivated conflict?

I situate such questions within the religious and cultural battles that have erupted around abortion laws and the allegedly nonrational modes of intervention deployed by many anti-abortion activists. I offer an observational account of a particularly acute episode of religiously motivated conflict: the anti-abortion battles triggered by President Obama's 2009

commencement address at the University of Notre Dame. In that case and others, I argue, fostering strenuous pluralism and healthy conflict requires a capacious vision of public discourse. Such a vision must generously but critically include visceral and "irrational" forms of public participation often dismissed as intolerant and unreasonable. Interventions of this kind, I argue, should not be written off. In fact, healthy conflict demands a willingness to charitably understand and creatively respond to forms of public engagement and protest that one may be inclined to dismiss.

A strategically effective conception of healthy conflict would redirect the inclination to describe the oppositions in terms of fragmentation and the conflict as hopeless. In other words, it must recognize and resist temptations to draw terminally polarizing contrasts between sides and to apply constructed labels that exacerbate conflict. At the same time, a conflict transformation approach must avoid downplaying the severity of the disagreements in an effort to make them go away. As I suggest, this calls for three related tasks: (1) to reframe an understanding of intolerance, (2) to harness the constructive potential of conflict, and (3) to develop strategies for confronting seemingly intransigent forms of conflict and intolerance.

The constructive dimension of Chapter 8 thus presses beyond the limitations of the standard tolerance–intolerance dichotomy and reorients the fact–feeling and reason–"gut" dichotomies that demarcate contemporary public discourse in the US. These forms of charitable recognition, capacious inclusion, sensitive translation, and generous understanding hold the potential to reshape the poor communication and misunderstanding characteristic of degenerative conflict. At the same time, "reframing enactments" that engage the intuitions and emotions through humor, satire, irony, and other modes of "nonrational" or "metarational" appeal, provide indispensable means of wading through the oppositional and allegedly nonrational or irrational character of expressive politics.

Chapter 9 uses this account of healthy conflict to provide a new angle of vision on one of the most pressing and persistent sources of religious intolerance and conflict in US public life today: Islamophobia. The relationality that orients healthy conflict includes – but is always more than – immediate, or face-to-face, relationship. A proper understanding of such relationality requires recognizing the myriad forms of interdependence and connection in which our encounters with others occur. It requires thinking about the spaces wherein personal and group identities are

constituted. It requires thinking about how particular people and groups carry the relational spaces and histories within them – spaces within which they may not encounter each other face to face, but nonetheless relate through symbol systems and ritual practices, shared language, histories, and stories of origin.

As my account emphasizes, differences in power inflect relational spaces and the patterns and histories of those spaces. The practices and (sometimes tacitly) shared understandings that constitute those spaces, histories, and patterns are always normatively charged. To preserve the relational nature of healthy conflict requires attending to the normative implications of what Benedict Anderson calls "imagined communities." This means that promoting healthy conflict requires vigilance about the ways that symbolically articulated identities (e.g., ethnic, national, and religious identities) and cultural patterns may, however, inadvertently fuel and perpetuate degenerate forms of conflict. This is precisely the case in the forms of Islamophobia that have erupted across the US since – but also, I argue, long before – September 11, 2001. I argue that conceiving of the US as naturally inclined to be religiously tolerant frequently functions as a central feature of American exceptionalism. Bringing this dynamic to the surface is thus vital in resisting the modes of exclusion that the unreflective glorification of US civic nationalism may promote. Here I focus on contemporary forms of civic nationalism in the US and France. In both contexts, pursuing "healthy conflict" impels ethicists, social theorists, and peacebuilders to attend to how Islamophobia relates to US and French national identities in particular. Thinking about specific episodes of religious intolerance in this context challenges the tendencies of both ethno-religious and civic nationalisms to lead to degenerate forms of conflict. Conversely, the lens of healthy conflict illumines how identities rooted in practices of religious traditions (in this case, Muslim religious identities) can promote the expressive freedom, moral imagination, and socio-theoretical critique I have suggested we most need today.

Of course, I write as a white, cisgender, heterosexual male in the midst of conflicts that are increasingly recognized as rooted in, and inscribed with, disparities of power and forms of domination that cut along lines of race, class, gender, as well as national, religious and sexual identities (among other points of intersection). I write, moreover, as someone who is committed to the prospect that democratic social transformation is the best hope for transforming the conditions that suppress people and groups who are most vulnerable in contemporary US society. To propose

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a model of healthy conflict requires that I grapple with these challenges in full recognition of myself as one who is implicated in them – as one who is, by default, a beneficiary of them. But I am also one who believes that these causes and conditions of destructive conflict can be challenged and altered, and that those who have most benefitted must be awakened and converted to participate in the processes of dismantling and transformation of the patriarchal, classist, white supremacist powers, and through that participation, be changed ourselves. To those ends I devote the following chapters.