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## Talking with the Other Side

An interview with Krista Tippett

By James Shaheen

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Krista Tippett at her home in Minneapolis.



**I**n an age of polarized public discourse, there aren't many voices out there that move beyond the war of words to take a deeper look at the issues that so sharply divide us. Krista Tippett is the rare exception. An author and broadcast journalist best known for her radio show *On Being* (formerly, *Speaking of Faith*), she launched the [Civil Conversations Project](#) in 2011 to restore nuance and context to the most complex issues of our day, from abortion rights to same-sex marriage. Her soft-spoken approach belies a toughness that becomes apparent in her unflinching commitment to hold a question before opposing sides, challenging each to develop a clear understanding of how the other thinks. The point, she often says, is not to force common ground but to learn to live together with differences.

Personable and open-minded, Tippet draws from her guests an intimate honesty that often leads to unlikely friendships between otherwise bitterly divided camps. Although not a Buddhist herself, her intuitive grasp of Right Speech models a new way of engaging those we most disagree with.

*Tricycle* editor and publisher James Shaheen chatted with Tippet by phone in December.

**I'd like to start by asking you to explain a little bit about what the Civil Conversations Project is, what you hope to achieve with it, and how you developed it.** The Project started around the fall of 2010, during the polarized election season. I think one thing that's gone wrong with public discourse is that we have an assumption, informed by our democratic process, that if we have a disagreement, at some point we'll get on the same page about it and if not, we'll take a vote and move on. But we're living in this historic moment when we are visiting questions that are intimate and civilizational, and we may not fundamentally be on the same page for decades. To me the really defining question of our humanity and of our civil society right now is not *can we agree*. That's kind of idealistic, and it's not helping us. It's more about how can we live together while we disagree about these things that are so personal. This requires much more of us spiritually and practically than the illusion that we'll force agreement.

**I was just listening to your interview with abortion rights activist Frances Kissling. Her feeling is that the pro-choice and pro-life movements have so focused on an absolute yes-or-no perspective that the context and complexity are lost. You seem to agree with her. Can you talk about that?** We have all kind of unconsciously given ourselves over to a culture that says this is the way we resolve disagreement: it's yes or no. Abortion is a great example. It's intimate, it's civilizational, and it's nearly impossible to discuss that way—you're for or you're against—while the fact is that almost none of us are on the extreme. Few say, "It's always great," or "It's always wrong." I'm standing up for saying that "yes or no" is not the way to frame this important discussion or our encounter with people who feel differently about it than we do. With Civil Conversations, we began interviewing people who I felt brought wisdom and nourishment to the issues. We tried to reintroduce the context and the human complexity by starting every discussion in a different place than we're used to, one that points out a lot of possibilities that remain unexplored. We got out of these well-worn grooves.

**Right. We usually begin by trying to bring the other side around to our view and, if not, to find common ground. But as Frances Kissling says in the interview, common ground is not the goal: "The National Conference of Catholic Bishops could never find common ground on abortion," she says, "but people with differences come together with the goal of getting a better understanding of why others believe what they do." Her sense is that the pressure of coming to agreement is in fact counterproductive. We don't hear that often, if at all.** I know, it's really countercultural, isn't it? But it rings true in terms of what we know about our complexity as human beings.

**Do you imagine that these sorts of discussions will help people to not be so hostile toward one another and maybe to think about the effects that their agenda will have on the lives of others?** This gets really quickly into pretty deep waters. There are things a lot of us or at least some of us feel really, really strongly about. But if we let go of the idea, at least in the moment of discussion, that the point is to change the mind of the other and to get the resolution we want, then we start asking ourselves, how do we measure success? What is the nature of change? What are we accomplishing?

Last fall I had Frances Kissling back on the show in a discussion with [Christian scholar and activist] Reverend David Gushee. Gushee is pro-life and also a nuanced thinker and, like Kissling, is at this point more concerned with the quality of our human encounter and our civic life than he is with the issue itself. As people who have been passionate about the issue, they are both alarmed at where it's taken us as a culture. I asked them, "Then how do we talk about what change looks like?" Then I read them something from a dialogue that took place in Boston after an abortion doctor was shot—this was a secret dialogue over five years with three leaders on each side of the abortion issue. At the end they all said—and it was a good reflection of what happens in meaningful encounter—"None of us at the end of it had changed our position on abortion." In some ways we were all more articulate at the end of these five years about where we are on the position."

But they also said that they could never demonize the other side, now that they had come to love and treasure these people. That they had absolutely changed the way they would talk about or work with the idea of the other, and that had infected their group.

And that the most valuable thing to them is that they'd come to not just an understanding but an experience of what it means to hold a passionate conviction and also model being constructive as citizens—modeling a way of living together with differences.

**You interviewed Jim Daly, president of Focus on the Family, along with conservative Christian author and pastor Gabe Lyons. They both represent a new approach to dialogue for Christian evangelicals, particularly Gabe Lyons, who would rather focus, say, on troubled marriages in his own community than on whether same-sex marriages are okay. Lyons seems to have accepted the idea that same-sex marriages are not responsible for troubled “traditional” marriages. On the Focus on the Family website though, Daly’s group continues to advocate against gay marriage and abortion rights, and their reading list includes books promoting therapy to reverse sexual orientation in youth. Isn’t it fair to ask, “Hey, why should I sit down with these people when they’re fighting against my rights?”** For me personally, wondering whether rights are infringed upon is not a question. This probably goes back to my Southern Baptist roots in Oklahoma. I rejected a lot of that world and certainly a lot of the religiosity of it, but as I was creating this show in the early 2000s, we had George Bush, an evangelical president. Suddenly this group had a lot of political power. I was reading these erudite analyses of the evangelical movement in *The New York Times*, and I didn't recognize in the descriptions the people I grew up with. The reality is so much messier and bigger and actually more hopeful on the ground than any of these blanket depictions of people or groups would lead you to believe.

I think a lot about what Martin Marty said to me once. He's one of the great historians of American Christianity and religion in the 20th century. Before 9/11 he led a seven-year global study on fundamentalism across the traditions: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism—probably Buddhism was in there. He used the word *fundamentalisms*, plural. We all know instinctively that our own particular group is very diverse and that even within our closest network there are people who drive us crazy. There are the extremists and there are the moderates. But while we know the diversity in our own groups, when we look at another group we automatically just as instinctively imagine them to be more homogeneous. Marty said to me: in terms of fundamentalism in the world, if we want the potential moderates in any group to become more moderate on the issues, we must create space in our common life for them to be moderators.

**While watching the video interview with Daly and Lyons, I was actually beginning to have good feelings about them, to my great surprise.** Yes! [*Laughs.*]

**They came off as, well, so human. At the same time, my kneejerk mistrust kicked in. In other venues, Lyons has acknowledged how much he's learned from gay rights activists about how to use the media to shape public opinion. Yet he and Daly are reaching out, and by all appearances, they are sincere. I imagine a lot of people felt the way I did: you created a situation in the interview where I was uncomfortable with the good feelings I was having about these people.** Well, I guess that's probably a success, right? I had the chief rabbi of Great Britain on my show. He is a huge pioneer in the world in terms of interreligious encounters. He understands how important it is that all our traditions bring the best of what they have to our common challenges. He's a person of incredible dignity and intellect. A young producer on my staff found out that in Great Britain, where they are having their own version of the gay marriage debate, the rabbi had lodged his tradition's opposition to a proposed law that would essentially require that religious institutions bless same-sex partnerships. And this producer asked, “Can we put him on the air? He's very inspiring about interreligious encounters, but here is this position he holds that a lot of our listeners will disagree with.” Part of my reaction is that he's an orthodox rabbi; it is not a newsflash that he holds this view. And the thing is he's also the chief rabbi. He is in a leadership role. So even if—and I don't know this—his personal theology is something different, he represents a group. We all live with these contradictions—certainly people who are in leadership do—and I think we can screen for personal integrity.

To me it's a question of how people live. I need to know that my guests have as many questions as they do answers. I think this is precisely where, in Buddhist terms, “right speech” becomes important: when we disagree. That's precisely when we need to practice these virtues.

**In an earlier interview, Frances Kissling mentioned the risk in reaching out to the other side. She said, “We need to be willing to be vulnerable in front of the perceived enemy.” The trust issue is so big.** To me that’s a really important point. That’s why all of us who want to talk about this and do something different have to be really clear-eyed. This is not something fluffy and sweet. People are not safe or invited to be vulnerable in most of the spaces where we discuss these things these days. We have a responsibility to create spaces where we can take that risk and not feel that the point is to be right or win an argument. When meaningful change happens, it doesn’t mean a change in position but a change in how we live together and how we treat each other.



Krista Tippett at her home in Minneapolis.

**I wonder: Is there any room for passionate disagreement or the fight for what you believe in? Or do we all have to just become wimps?** No, we don’t. In fact, I worry a lot about the language of civility, because I think it sounds too nice, and I don’t think this is about being nice at all. I think it’s about being adventurous and taking risks. It’s about honoring our passion but saying our passion for this issue is not the only thing that defines us. Our passion for a shared life can be in the mix too.

A lot of what I’ve been doing is introducing people in an hourlong show to a different voice on fraught issues like marriage or abortion. Or with Jim Daly and Gabe Lyons, just starting a conversation in a different place. Certainly there still have to be places for debating the issues. But we can reframe those debates, like we did with the gay marriage show. Actually, we called it “The Future of Marriage”—trying to get at what is at stake in the way we navigate this vast social change. And we took it as a given that the change is happening. This made some journalists around us nervous. They would have felt safer with the old two-sided “balanced” debate—one voice for homosexuality, one against—when in fact a majority of Americans across the political and social spectrum favor some kind of legal recognition for same sex couples. The question we took up—with Jonathan Rauch and David Blankenhorn, who occupy fairly different places along the spectrum of that emerging reality—is how can we navigate this reality so that it is good for our common life, good for the institution of marriage as a whole. You enter a lot of provocative and demanding territory from this vantage point, but it’s new territory and it’s full of promise.

**A lot of the evangelicals, Lyons among them, seem to think that debate has been had and won. What I found interesting about Lyons’s position was that he’s saying, Why the hell are we focusing on gay marriage all the time? Why aren’t we focusing on ourselves? That was a bit of wisdom that I hadn’t expected from him, and it made it possible to have a discussion and see what his own concerns in his own community were.** Yes, and they’re really walking that walk. The event with Daly and Lyons was the first of these interviews that we did in the fall. In some ways it felt like the riskiest. Like, what are you doing having two evangelicals on? But for me, because evangelical voices have been so prominent in the divisiveness of the last few decades, I thought it was important.

We need to also just let ourselves stop and take a breath and say marriage is a big deal, abortion is a big deal. I think it would make a big difference if we could sometimes just acknowledge that we’re talking about big changes, that we’re just these creatures who

are not equipped for rapid change. Some of us are even less equipped because we're vulnerable, or we have less education or less financial security.

**When I was listening to these interviews, I noticed my own attachment to being right. In Buddhism, attachment to view is strongly discouraged. I think when people watch the interview with Daly and Lyons, or people listen to your interview with Kissling, if they're honest, they'll become aware of their own attachment to being right or holding a view.** I've been thinking a lot lately about how we're all raised and trained to be advocates. There's this culture of advocacy, and it's advocacy for your identity, or it's advocacy for issues, or it's advocacy for your passion. Even your love of the world becomes advocacy. And I think for those of us who are planted in spiritual traditions, we really have to question that. It's hard to say, "Well, it's wrong to be standing up for something that's good and right," but I don't think that's what's at stake here. How do you position yourself vis-à-vis change, vis-à-vis the human beings who are advocating for the other side?

Jim Daly in particular was a real revelation to me. So part of my interview preparation method is the "Vulcan mind meld" approach. I'm a big *Star Trek* fan. I try not to just read, and I try not to just understand what somebody knows or believes. I try to understand how they think. That creates an atmosphere of hospitality. If you sit down with someone and you know that they get you, you can relax, right? And you understand—and it's as much a visceral understanding as an intellectual understanding—that you're not going to have to defend or explain, that you are understood and you can go deeper.

Even though I was surprised in so many ways by the encounter with Daly, I wasn't surprised by what he thinks. I think the experience that you described was an experience that everybody in that room had, and it was such an interesting room. We were in Minnesota at the Humphrey Institute. We had everyone from one of the most socially conservative commentators in this community to the head of Planned Parenthood in Minnesota, an incredibly strong woman. What was amazing to me is that after that event both of those individuals separately came up to us and told us how excellent it had been. Even more important to me, the head of Planned Parenthood and Jim Daly exchanged phone numbers, and she was completely blown away by this, and I understand that communication has continued.

So something happened in that room that surprised everyone. After it was over I felt like even if all the technology had failed and we couldn't have done the radio show, it would have been worth it because it was a really transformative experience. I learned that something was possible.



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