

What We Heard About Sacred Convictions

We were privileged to have 40 thoughtful and passionate participants in our session—**Making Space for Sacred Convictions in D&D: Threat, Necessity or Opportunity?**—at the recent NCDD conference on October 18, 2014. In plenary and in breakout groups, they brainstormed and discussed many of the most relevant aspects of an issue that has generated so much controversy worldwide -- whether to include sacred convictions in dialogue--using marriage for same-sex couples as an example. This document synthesizes what the six presenters heard in the course of the 90 minutes we shared together. Here is a list of the major foci:

- **Can we even do this?** Can dialogue across sacred convictions ever be safe? Is there any possible common ground, and should we be seeking it? What if the difference is stark or irreconcilable? What might we see as goals of these dialogues? Are the rewards worth the challenges?
- **Dialogue about the sacred is personal.** This is true by definition (see “the word *sacred* and its implications” below). What do we risk in making ourselves vulnerable by participating in dialogue? A threat to our identity? Personal attacks? Family disapproval? To what extent do the dynamics of societal polarization influence the personal?
- **Issues of inclusion.** Every effort at dialogue can be more inclusive. Simply asserting that, however, obscures the myriad issues involved. How can we welcome groups whose members we don’t personally know? Can we include the “unincludable”: people whose convictions brook no interest in discussing their own sacred convictions or understanding others’ sacred convictions, or those who don’t *want* to be included? What kind of invitation would make underrepresented groups feel safe and welcome?
- **The word sacred and its implications.** *Sacred* has typically been used to describe religious convictions. Is that definition too narrow? Perhaps *sacred* could be interpreted to mean a type of life energy, “prior unity,” one’s identity and life story, or whatever we hold closest to our deepest selves. Whatever our definition of the word, its ramifications can make dialogue a challenge: what level of attachment should we have with our own sacred? Can we use it as a common point of connection? What do we do when my sacred stigmatizes or insults you?
- **Other issues of language.** How do we word invitations to dialogue in a way that excludes no one? It is essential to acknowledge differences in vocabulary across identity groups to facilitate mutual understanding. Awareness of one another’s triggers is essential.
- **Facilitating sacred dialogues.** The challenging nature of these dialogues puts facilitators in particularly difficult positions. It is best if the facilitation team comes from diverse traditions. Facilitators should maintain neutrality or, perhaps better, be transparent about their own beliefs and issues—a stance that requires extraordinary self-awareness. Meeting with like groups beforehand can prepare dialogue participants to enter the dialogue at a higher level. As with most dialogues, it is essential to create welcoming spaces, set ground rules, establish safety, use I-messages, etc.

- ***The importance of story.*** A focus on personal stories directs people to speak from their experience rather than from abstract concepts or theological or even constitutional dogma. When people exchange stories, they are likely to uncover elements of their common humanity and identify with each other. This ties directly with the observation that it's necessary for people to connect with both heart and head.
- ***Connecting across sacred divides.*** There is great value in seeing individuals within a sacred identity group as just that: individuals. If we feel distant from a particular group, we can use "weak ties" (e.g., the friend of a friend of a friend) to make connections in groups to which we ordinarily would not have access. Focusing on the most willing person in an unwilling group may provide a point of entry for dialogue.