

**THE BETTER  
ARGUMENTS  
PROJECT**

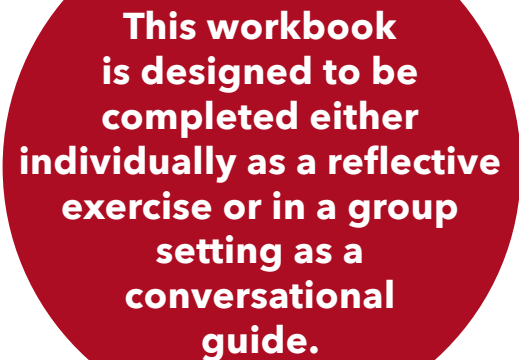
# **DIALOGUE THAT ENLARGES: BRIDGING IDEOLOGICAL DIVIDES THROUGH A FAITH LENS**



# PURPOSE

This workbook follows the Better Arguments Project framework and is designed to invite readers to think about the influence of faith and spirituality as they pursue constructive engagement across differences. The Better Arguments Project, the Inclusive America Project, and the Interfaith Youth Core have partnered to create this resource because we believe faith communities have an essential role in civic life – and in forging relationships across differences. This workbook includes activities designed to prompt readers to reflect on the intersection between their religious, spiritual, or ethical identities and role in civic life.

Faith-based institutions are one of the most underutilized assets in civil society. Across the United States, approximately 350,000 congregations and 228,000 faith-based organizations are working toward secular causes – more than schools, colleges, and universities combined. Faith-based institutions play a critical role in the spiritual, physical, and mental health of their members and of the surrounding community, and represent the full spectrum of American ethnic, racial, and religious diversity. For many Americans, their faith is what informs their moral framework. In short, faith communities are a deep well of social capital and play a special role in helping bridge our nation's divides.



**This workbook is designed to be completed either individually as a reflective exercise or in a group setting as a conversational guide.**

# WAYS TO ENGAGE THE WORKBOOK

This workbook includes a series of exercises with prompts that weave the Better Arguments framework into a faith-based examination of our civic culture and engagement across differences. These exercises can be completed either individually, using the fields to record answers and reflections, or in a group setting, as a conversational activity.

If you are using this workbook as a conversational activity, lead the group through each exercise and note the **suggested time** for how long you should spend on each page.

If you're leading a group discussion with this workbook, here are some tips to consider:

- **Keep Groups Small:** We recommend groups of five to eight people for this discussion.
- **Pace Yourself—but Be Flexible:** We recommend spending roughly 10 minutes per question section, but if your group members favor a particular question or theme, allow them extra time to continue to grapple with it. In total, we recommend 60 to 90 minutes for this discussion.
- **Embrace Silence:** If group members feel “stuck” and become quiet, allow them to reflect before you speak up.
- **Encourage Everyone to Speak:** We do not recommend establishing a speaker rotation, but if some voices dominate others, try to bring them into the discussion.

# INTRODUCTION TO BETTER ARGUMENTS FRAMEWORK<sup>1</sup>

We're living in an era of deep divisions. Cable television, social media feeds, and fraying personal relationships all reflect the same troubling pattern: Differences of opinion quickly escalate into attacks, mistrust, and civic stalemates. We have seen the effects of these divisions in our homes, our communities, our workplaces, and our houses of worship.

In this contentious climate, many people have retreated from civic life or have responded to social conflict with calls for civility. But abstaining from civic life only cedes our public dialogue to the most contentious and polarizing voices. And too often, "civility" means the mere absence of argument, or politely ignoring our differences.

American civic life doesn't need fewer arguments; it needs *better* arguments. An argument, an exchange of diverging or opposite views, carried out with the principles outlined below, has the potential to help bridge ideological divides and build pluralism – not by papering over those divides but by engaging more productively across differences, whether in town meetings, around the dinner table, or at houses of worship. **True pluralism**<sup>2</sup> does not mean a watering down of differences; rather, it is a robust engagement based on an understanding and respect for our differences, coupled with a mutual commitment toward to the common good.

The premise of the Better Arguments Project is that, to build a healthier civic culture with strong, communal bonds across differences, we don't need to argue less – we need to argue better. Arguing, if done right, can humanize those with whom we disagree and bring us together in the common pursuit of truth, rather than dividing us further – in turn, creating a healthier civic culture and a stronger democracy.

Indeed, argument has always been a critical aspect of American democracy: Fundamental and perpetual tensions between core values such as liberty and equality, for example, have existed throughout our country's history. Deep disagreement and discussion are also important parts of many religious traditions. The point of American civic life is not to resolve these tensions; we simply need to understand their origins and grow smarter about engaging them. Through the clash of different ideas and points of view, we often emerge with deeper insights and better solutions to the problems that affect us all.

In partnership with communities across the country, the Better Arguments Project developed a framework for constructive engagement across divides. In the following pages, we will introduce you to our framework, including the **Three Dimensions of Arguing Better**, which we believe provide the background and context for our disagreements, and the **Five Principles of a Better Argument**, which establish behavioral norms for healthy disagreements. In turn, you will be invited to examine this framework and brainstorm how to incorporate it into your own life.

- 1 If using you're using this workbook as a group, consider sharing some of this out loud and setting the stage with some of your own context about why you're engaging in this conversation.
- 2 **What is pluralism?** Religious pluralism is the state of being where every individual in a religiously diverse society has the rights, freedoms, and safety to worship, or not, according to their conscience.

# WHY ARGUMENTS?



If completing the workbook individually, take a moment to journal and/or reflect on the question prompts below.

If using the workbook as a group, read the prompts aloud and continue to open discussion. Allow some time for people to journal at the end before moving on. Suggested time: 10 minutes

- **Why is it important to find more constructive ways to engage across differences?**

- **What is the role of faith and spirituality in this pursuit?**

# THREE DIMENSIONS OF ARGUING BETTER: HISTORY, EMOTION, AND POWER



If completing the workbook individually, take a moment to journal and/or reflect on the question prompts below.  
If using the workbook as a group, read the prompts aloud and continue to open discussion.  
Allow some time for people to journal at the end before moving on. Suggested time: 10 minutes

Underlying context exists within all civic debates and can be broken into three major categories: **History, Emotion, and Power**.<sup>3</sup> Acknowledging and understanding these categories is a prerequisite to any Better Argument. **Religious, spiritual, or ethical teachings** also have a profound impact on our perspectives and inform many of our civic debates; understanding others' worldviews can make for healthier disagreement.

**Pick a current civic debate or hot-button topic to keep in mind as you address the following questions:**<sup>4</sup>

- Take a moment to articulate how this argument is playing out. Name at least two competing sides and narratives around the topic.
- How do various religious, spiritual, or ethical teachings inform commitments around this debate?
- What historical circumstances might have led to the divergent views on this issue over time?
- Why would someone have the "pro" view? Why would someone have the "con" view? What emotions do you think the two "sides" feel in this situation?
- Does anyone involved in this argument hold advantages or disadvantages? How might these power dynamics influence the way that opinions are formed?

3 **Historical Context** – Today's civic arguments are rooted in history. Arguments- being able to reckon with differences and forge joint solutions are critical to a healthy American civic life.

**Emotional Intelligence** – A Better Argument is one in which all participants use emotional intelligence, understanding why the other party is taking a certain stance, rather than immediately negating that party's opinion.

**Recognizing Power** – In many spaces of civil discourse, participants do not enter as equals and participants reckon with imbalances. A Better Argument requires being honest about power.

4 Below are some examples to possibly consider. Also consider focusing on an issue specific to your local community.  
Minimum Wage Increases | Healthcare Reform | Monuments and Memorials

# INVESTIGATING THE FIVE PRINCIPLES OF A BETTER ARGUMENT

Better Arguments have five major tenets: **(1) Take winning off the table; (2) prioritize relationships and listen passionately; (3) pay attention to context; (4) embrace vulnerability; and (5) make room to transform.** While the Three Dimensions of Arguing Better lay the foundation of a Better Argument, the Five Principles of a Better Argument are ways to improve arguments with others.

*Below is a series of exercises with prompts that weave the Five Principles of a Better Argument into a faith-based examination of our civic culture and engagement across differences. These exercises can be completed either individually, using the fields to record answers and reflections, or in a group setting, as a conversational activity. If you are leading a group conversation with this workbook, the same suggestions from the **Ways to Engage the Workbook** section apply. Suggested time: Roughly 10 minutes per page*

# PRINCIPLE 1:

## TAKE WINNING OFF THE TABLE

Many public arguments surface in contexts where a lot is at stake. A Better Argument, however, is not about winning or losing – defeating or converting the “other side.” It’s about presence and the robust exchange of ideas. Whatever the issue, those boundaries foster a more open discussion. When we take winning off the table, we preserve a space to both speak and listen, creating relationships that can build connections, support better decision making, and inspire civic involvement.

### ***Pre-Conditions for Arguing Better***

How do you balance your need to stand up for your beliefs with leaving room for the beliefs of others? When and why is it difficult for you to find the right balance?

### ***Unpacking Your Faith***

How does your religious, spiritual, or ethical identity shape your views or feelings on taking winning off the table? Are there any religious, spiritual, or ethical teachings that influence the way you relate to this concept?

### ***Principles to Practice***

What are some opportunities in your life to take winning off the table? What are some ways that you can work on this?



## PRINCIPLE 2:

# PRIORITIZE RELATIONSHIPS AND LISTEN PASSIONATELY

An argument becomes “better” when we start the conversation with human connection and prepare to listen, not just advance our own points of view. No matter the setting or the topic for argument, participants in a Better Argument should always “be human first.” This means inviting people to share their identities and their stories, not just their opinions.

### ***Pre-Conditions for Arguing Better***

It can be difficult to prioritize relationships and listen passionately when you disagree with someone. Is it possible for you to care for other the person when you don't care for that person's opinion? Why or why not?

### ***Unpacking Your Faith***

How does your religious, spiritual, or ethical identity shape your views or feelings on caring about all people regardless of differences? Are there any religious teachings or passages of scripture that you believe apply to this concept?

### ***Principles to Practice***

What are some opportunities in your life to prioritize relationships and listen passionately? What are some ways that you can work on this?

# PRINCIPLE 3:

## PAY ATTENTION TO CONTEXT

A Better Argument event must begin in the needs, culture, and context of a specific community. This means that on-the-ground community leaders identify issues most relevant to their community and then intentionally structure the conversation to create shared knowledge and reflect local culture. No belief is formed in a vacuum; our opinions are informed by all kinds of contexts, whether it's lived experiences, information to which we have access, or cultures we practice. Try to understand why your interlocutor holds their beliefs, not just what their beliefs are. (And even stop to examine why you hold your own beliefs.)

### ***Pre-Conditions for Arguing Better***

Paying attention to context means not impulsively reacting to what someone believes; instead, we should take a moment to understand why the person believes this. When and why is it difficult to do act this way?

### ***Unpacking Your Faith***

Religion, spirituality, or ethics can influence our civic views in profound ways. Take a moment to reflect on how you are influenced by your belief system. What would you want someone you're debating with to understand about your perspective before engaging in an argument?

### ***Principles to Practice***

What are some opportunities in your life to pay attention to context? What are some ways that you can work on this?

# PRINCIPLE 4:

## EMBRACE VULNERABILITY

Better Arguments are hard work, and there is inherent risk in showing up. A successful Better Argument depends on participants' willingness to be open, honest, and vulnerable – as both speakers and listeners. Embracing this kind of vulnerability is essential to entering any kind of conversation that isn't simply confirming our own worldviews. We believe this behavior is contagious: The more we model it, the more others will feel free to do so themselves.

### ***Pre-Conditions for Arguing Better***

Entering any space that does not automatically re-confirm your existing worldview can be a vulnerable experience. What makes you feel vulnerable in these experiences?

### ***Unpacking Your Faith***

How does your religious, spiritual, or ethical identity shape your views or feelings on vulnerability? Are there any religious teachings or passages of scripture that you believe apply to this concept?

### ***Principles to Practice***

What are some opportunities in your life to embrace vulnerability? What are some ways that you can work on this?

# PRINCIPLE 5:

## MAKE ROOM TO TRANSFORM

Because the goal of winning is not part of a Better Argument, the experience can change how we engage with a difficult issue and with one another. If your goal is to learn from an argument, you won't get anywhere if you're unwilling to yield any points or possibly walk away with a new viewpoint. Treat the argument as a learning experience and be ready to have your assumptions challenged.

### ***Pre-Conditions for Arguing Better***

How do you balance keeping an open mind with adhering to your fundamental beliefs? When and why is this difficult?

### ***Unpacking Your Faith***

How does your religious, spiritual, or ethical identity shape your views or feelings on change and growth? Are there any religious teachings or passages of scripture that you believe apply to this concept?

### ***Principles to Practice***

What are some opportunities in your life to take make room to transform? What are some ways that you can work on this?

# CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION



If completing the workbook individually, take a moment to journal and/or reflect on the question prompts below.

If using the workbook as a group, read the prompts aloud and continue to open discussion.

Allow some time for people to journal at the end before moving on. Suggested time: 10 minutes

- Let's revisit our first set of questions: Why is it important to find more constructive ways to engage across differences? What is the role of faith and spirituality in this pursuit? After completing this workbook, is there anything you would add or change to your answers?

- Revisit the "argument" you discussed in the Three Dimensions section. How would that argument be different if everyone involved practiced the Better Argument framework?

- What are some concrete commitments you can make to argue better?

# REVIEWERS

*Thank you to our team of reviewers who leveraged their subject matter expertise to provide feedback on our workbook.*

**Saba Ayman-Nolley**, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Northeastern Illinois University, President of the Hyde Park & Kenwood Interfaith Council, Member of the Chicago Baha'i Community

**Lindsay Bressman**, Executive Director at Civic Spirit

**Matthew Brownstein**, Director of the Civic Spirit Student Delegates Program, New York City Department of Education Assistant Principal, Founding Social Studies Teacher for Teach for America

**Rabbi Michael G. Holzman**, Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation

**Reverend Zina Jacque**, Ph.D., Community Church of Barrington

**Najla Mouchrek**, Ph.D., Assistant Dean for Interfaith Leadership & Holistic Development at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

**Charles Randall Paul**, President of the Foundation for Religious Diplomacy

**Tiphonie Shoemaker**, Director of Education & Pedagogy at Civic Spirit

**Harley Ungar**, Member of Civic Spirit Cohort 3 Teacher of Individuals & Societies at Solomon Schechter Day School of Bergen County

# THE PARTNERS



INCLUSIVE AMERICA PROJECT

aspen institute

In a multi-religious, multi-racial and multi-ethnic nation, can we all live together? **The Inclusive America Project** at the Aspen Institute believes there is value in those differences. We envision a society where diverse religious communities and the nonreligious fully embrace America's ideals by engaging and thriving with mutual trust and respect. Launched in 2012, we want to strengthen the understanding of religion's role in advancing equity and the common good. The Project focuses on bridging the gap between ideas and impact, working to build the capacity of faith-based leaders, increase philanthropic investment, and serve as a national knowledge hub that informs and connects leaders from various fields and faiths. By emphasizing network and community building, the Inclusive America Project is creating and amplifying connections that can break down barriers for generations to come.



**Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC)** is a national nonprofit working toward an America where people of different faiths, worldviews, and traditions can bridge differences and find common values to build a shared life together. Look at American democracy today and you'll see a society trying hard to live up to its ideals in the face of unprecedented diversity and difference. It's not just in the news. In today's America, we all navigate deep differences with others in our everyday lives – especially when it comes to religion. Whether or not our diversity is a good thing is entirely up to us. As a community, we can make it the thread that binds us closer; otherwise, we allow apathy, tribalism, and voices of intolerance to define our futures. Interfaith cooperation is the key to transforming this religiously diverse society into a more just, kind, and pluralistic nation. IFYC is working to make it the norm, not the exception, in American life.



**The Aspen Institute** is a global nonprofit organization committed to realizing a free, just, and equitable society. Founded in 1949, the Institute drives change through dialogue, leadership, and action to help solve the most important challenges facing the United States and the world. Headquartered in Washington, DC, the Institute has a campus in Aspen, Colorado, and an international network of partners. The Aspen Institute **Citizenship and American Identity Program** explores the question of what it means to be American, and how to promote a shared sense of national identity in an age of demographic flux and severe inequality.



**Facing History and Ourselves** is a global educational organization that reaches millions of students worldwide every year. Using the lessons of history – and history in the making – Facing History equips teachers to provide students with the skills to think critically and wrestle with difficult issues. Teachers work closely with students to make personal connections between the past and their present. The rigorous curriculum sparks their desire to look beyond themselves and participate in the broader world. Facing History is creating future generations of engaged, informed, and responsible decision-makers who will stand up for justice, truth, and equality when faced with injustice, misinformation, and bigotry. Facing History transforms required lessons in history into inspired lessons in humanity, empowering youth who will change the world for the better.



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