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**The Ethics of Incivility:  
Anger, Intolerance, and Ridicule as Essential Christian Practice**

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From left to right, many across the political spectrum are in broad agreement that incivility is a fundamental problem in American society. However, in the current context the civility mandate requires that some people debate their basic humanity in calm and measured tones. As communications theorists have long recognized, civility and decorum help to preserve injustice and even, “condemn the dispossessed to non-being.” When the very space of being is effaced, how does one promote the radical inclusivity at the heart of Christ’s ministry? If, as Martin Luther King, Jr. notes, “a riot is the language of the unheard,” what is the role of ethics in confronting a status quo that silences calls for radical change by appealing to civility? Has civility perhaps even become a fetish; a notion uncritically invoked that often preempts meaningful ethical analysis of social structures and the ideologies through which they remain legitimate? Drawing on both academic research and years of experience as a community organizer and elected official, I argue that incivility, anger, intolerance, and ridicule are central to Christian practice and often provide the only ethical alternative.

Given the current prominence of civility, it is worth considering why civility is never invoked by those such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Frederick Douglass, Thomas Merton, or Jesus, figures widely revered for confronting extreme social injustice in a highly ethical manner. Gandhi’s first concern was not nonviolence but resisting humiliation by any means necessary. King frequently advocated militancy, confrontation, and hostility in the struggle for social justice, and he derided those who eschewed direct action as proponents of a weak and sentimental love that amounted to “emotional bosh.” Douglass spoke of the need for, “scorching irony, not convincing argument.” Merton thought it likely that a theology of love was also a theology of revolution, and saw the necessity of obtaining, “the wisdom of the serpent which is seldom acquired in Sunday school.” And, of course, Jesus was decidedly uncivil to those in positions of power and claimed to bring division and fire as opposed to unity and peace. The theologian Walter Wink goes so far as to condemn the standard reading of turning the other cheek as, “the basis for systematic training in cowardice.” Instead, Wink interprets the maxim as Jesus giving instructions for aggressive defiance.

## Proposal — *The Ethics of Incivility*

In today's context, we should also contemplate why Catholic saints such as Aquinas, Augustine, Francis of Assisi, and John Chrysostom not only regard anger as a blessing but consider the failure to become angry in certain instances as deeply unethical. Likewise, Gandhi reserves his harshest rebuke not for violence but for cowardice, believing that one could not truly practice *satyagraha* without first working, "to own one's fury at injustice and ... be willing to fight and, if necessary, die for its eradication." The Christian pacifist A.J. Muste put it this way: "In a world built on violence, one must be a revolutionary before one can be a pacifist." What are the ethics of the urgent revolution for which Muste, Gandhi, and Merton advocate? When violence is primarily carried out by, as Merton puts it, "a polite massively organized white-collar murder machine" that "is outwardly ordered and respectable," does civility constrain our ability to confront injustice by mandating the very standards of respectability that produce violence? If, as Merton suggests, "the theology of love must seek to deal realistically with the evil and injustice in the world," how does one practice Christian ethics in revolting against bureaucratic structures that effortlessly inscribe suffering into the daily lives of billions of people while providing order and stability to billions of others?

The challenges presented by these thinkers compel us to wonder if we typically approach the ethics of means and ends from the wrong direction. Is the ethical question perhaps not, "What methods are permissible to attain a just result?" but rather, "What are the most effective strategies for injecting ethical considerations into social policy and political debate?" As King puts it, "The question is not whether one should use his gun when his home is attacked [King says yes], but whether it was tactically wise to use a gun while participating in an organized demonstration." For King, Muste, and Gandhi, the only true unethical choice is submission to exploitation and abuse. By considering the questions posed by these and other thinkers, this lecture proposes to shift the focus away from civility and return to the domain of ethics.