



A DCI Deliberation Guide

Religion in Public Life:

*What role should religion play in the public sphere
and government policies?*

Format for Deliberation

Before the Deliberation

- I. Read this Deliberation Guide (required)

During the Deliberation

- I. Setting Expectations (5 min.)
- II. Getting to Know Each Other (5 min.)
- III. Personal Impressions of Religion and Public Life (10 min.)
- IV. Evaluating Arguments about Religion and Public Life (20 min.)
- V. Controversial Cases (15 min.)
- VI. Reflections (5 min.)

Background

Introduction to Religion in Public Life: Legal and Constitutional Background

The role of religion in public life and government policy has long been a subject of debate in the United States. This deliberation guide and its corresponding panel discussion aim to explore a range of perspectives on this issue, fostering a well-informed and constructive discussion. At the heart of this debate is the question: **What role should religion play in the public square and in government policies?**

To productively engage with this question, it is helpful to distinguish between public life, the public square, and the policy sphere. **Public life** encompasses the broad ways individuals and groups engage with society, including civic participation, cultural expression, and social activism. **The public square** refers more specifically to spaces—both physical and metaphorical—where public discourse, debate, and the exchange of ideas take place, such as town halls, newspapers, and online platforms. **The policy sphere** is the most narrowly defined, focusing on the formal processes of policymaking and implementation, where laws and regulations are crafted, debated, and enforced by elected officials, courts, and government agencies. While these three

domains overlap, recognizing their distinctive features can help clarify the different ways religion shapes social values, influences public debate, and informs government policy.¹

Understanding the **constitutional foundations** and key legal precedents that shape the relationship between religion and government in the United States is also important for engaging with this topic (due to space and time constraints, this guide focuses on the American context). The **First Amendment** to the Constitution is directly relevant, as it contains two key provisions known as the Religion Clauses:

- **The Establishment Clause:** “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion...”² This clause prevents the government from officially endorsing or favoring a particular religion.
- **The Free Exercise Clause:** “...or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”³ This clause protects individuals’ rights to practice their religion without undue government interference.

The U.S. Supreme Court has issued many rulings interpreting these clauses, leading to key legal precedents that have profoundly influenced how religion interacts with public life and public policy. Different judges, legal experts, and political figures have understood “favoring a particular religion” and “undue government interference” differently, and they have permitted or limited practices such as parochial school funding or prayer in schools depending on how they are interpreted. To provide some context for these debates, below is an overview of some of the **key legal decisions and laws** relevant to this discussion.

1. Government and Religious Expression

The **Supreme Court has upheld certain government acknowledgments of religion while restricting overt religious favoritism.** In *Marsh v. Chambers* (1983), the Court ruled that state legislatures could open sessions with a prayer delivered by a government-funded chaplain, citing the historical role of religion in American public life.⁴ This decision did not apply the three-part standard the Court had used in *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971), signaling a shift in how the Court assessed Establishment Clause cases. The *Lemon* standard stated that a government action violates the Establishment Clause if it lacks a secular purpose, has the primary effect of promoting or disparaging religion, and excessively entangles the government in religion.⁵ Rulings following the new standard, established in *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* (2022),

¹ For more on these different domains, see Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. University of Chicago Press, 1958; Neuhaus, Richard John. *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*. Eerdmans, 1984; Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. MIT Press, 1991; and Easton, David. *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*. University of Chicago Press, 1965.

² U.S. Const. amend. I. <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/bill-of-rights-transcript>.

³ U.S. Const. amend. I. <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/bill-of-rights-transcript>.

⁴ *Marsh v. Chambers*, 463 U.S. 783 (1983). <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/463/783/>.

⁵ Greene, Peter. 2022. “The Supreme Court Killed A Fifty-Year-Old Test For Church And State Separation. Will We Miss It?” <https://www.forbes.com/sites/petergreene/2022/07/13/the-supreme-court-killed-a-fifty-year-old-test-for-church-and-state-separation-will-we-miss-it/>.

must reference “historical practices and understandings” and reflect the “understanding of the Founding Fathers.”⁶

Conversely, **the Court has also ruled that the free exercise of religion may be restricted if religious acts violate religiously-neutral laws.** In *Employment Division v. Smith* (1990), two Native Americans were fired for using peyote in religious ceremonies and were denied unemployment benefits. The Court upheld this decision, ruling that neutral, generally applicable laws do not violate the Free Exercise Clause, even if they incidentally burden religious practices.⁷ This decision led Congress to pass the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) in 1993, which established that government policies may not “substantially burden” religious exercise unless they serve a compelling state interest through the least restrictive means.⁸

2. Religion and Legal Exemptions

While RFRA was intended to protect religious minorities, some legal scholars argue that it has created **special privileges for religious individuals and institutions.**⁹ Its impact can be seen in various legal exemptions, such as vaccination exemptions, which exist in 30 states for religious reasons and 15 states for religious or personal/philosophical reasons.¹⁰ This debate over religious exemptions extends to corporate rights. In *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* (2014), the Supreme Court ruled that privately held for-profit corporations could seek religious exemptions from federal mandates under RFRA, such as those requiring employers to provide contraceptive coverage in health insurance plans.¹¹

3. Religion and Anti-Discrimination Laws

Recent Supreme Court cases have grappled with **religious freedom versus anti-discrimination protections.** The 2015 ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* that legalized same-sex marriage nationwide acknowledged that “many who deem same-sex marriage to be wrong reach that conclusion based on decent and honorable religious or philosophical premise.” It also asserted, however, that “when that sincere, personal opposition becomes enacted law and public policy, the necessary consequence is to put the imprimatur of the State itself on an exclusion that soon demeans or stigmatizes those whose own liberty is then denied.”¹²

⁶ Greene, Peter. 2022. The Supreme Court Killed A Fifty-Year-Old Test For Church And State Separation. Will We Miss It? <https://www.forbes.com/sites/petergreene/2022/07/13/the-supreme-court-killed-a-fifty-year-old-test-for-church-and-state-separation-will-we-miss-it/>.

⁷ *Employment Division v. Smith*, 494 U.S. 872 (1990). <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/494/872/>.

⁸ Religious Freedom Restoration Act, 42 U.S.C. § 2000bb (1993). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/103rd-congress/house-bill/1308>.

⁹ Douglas Laycock, “The Religious Freedom Restoration Act,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 10, no. 1 (1993): 69–104. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1051153>.

¹⁰ National Conference of State Legislatures, “State Non-Medical Exemptions from School Immunization Requirements,” 2024. <https://www.ncsl.org/health/state-non-medical-exemptions-from-school-immunization-requirements>.

¹¹ *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*, 573 U.S. 682 (2014). <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/573/682/>.

¹² *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. 644 (2015). <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/576/644/>.

The intersection of religious beliefs and anti-discrimination law was further tested in *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission* (2018). The Court ruled in favor of a baker who refused to make a wedding cake for a same-sex couple, stating that Colorado’s Civil Rights Commission had shown “impermissible hostility” toward his religious beliefs.¹³ In *303 Creative LLC v. Elenis* (2023), the Court ruled on First Amendment free speech grounds that a web designer could not be compelled to create a website – a form of speech, in its view – that conflicted with her religious beliefs regarding gay marriage.¹⁴

4. Religion and Political Activity

While religious expression is constitutionally protected, **nonprofit religious organizations face legal restrictions on political activity**. The Johnson Amendment (1954) prohibits tax-exempt organizations, including churches, from endorsing or opposing political candidates.¹⁵ Although President Trump sought to weaken this restriction via executive order,¹⁶ the amendment remains in effect but is rarely if ever enforced.¹⁷

The legal landscape surrounding religion in public life is complex, as judges and policymakers have attempted to balance the rights of religious expression with principles of governmental neutrality, non-discrimination, and secular governance. These legal precedents and debates inform the central question of this deliberation guide: What role should religion play in the public square and in government policies?

Different Perspectives on the Role of Religion in Public Life

The role of religion in public life is a deeply complex and often contested issue, shaped by history, culture, legal principles, and personal beliefs. While individuals may share broad ideological commitments (i.e., in politics) and metaphysical orientations (i.e., about the nature of reality and existence), their specific views on religion and its role in the public sphere can vary significantly. Not all religious people share the same views on this topic, nor do all secular people. Likewise, conservatives disagree among themselves on these issues, as do liberals. We have therefore found it helpful to think about different perspectives about religion in public life along two dimensions – one’s ideological orientation and one’s metaphysical orientation. Combining these dimensions results in four general perspectives – **secular conservative, secular liberal, religious conservative, and religious liberal** – that this section explores in more detail.

¹³ *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*, 584 U.S. 617 (2018). <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/584/16-111/>.

¹⁴ *303 Creative LLC v. Elenis*, 600 U.S. 570 (2023). <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/600/21-476/>.

¹⁵ 26 U.S.C. § 501(c)(3) (Johnson Amendment). <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/26/501>.

¹⁶ Executive Order 13798, “Promoting Free Speech and Religious Liberty,” 2017.

<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2017/05/09/2017-09574/promoting-free-speech-and-religious-liberty>.

¹⁷ “The Johnson Amendment In 5 Questions And Answers,” NPR. 2017.

<https://www.npr.org/2017/02/03/513187940/the-johnson-amendment-in-five-questions-and-answers>.

		<i>Metaphysical Orientation</i>	
		Religious	Secular
<i>Ideological Orientation</i>	Conservative	Religious Conservative	Secular Conservative
	Liberal	Religious Liberal	Secular Liberal

These categories are presented as helpful reference points, offering a clear framework for understanding how different individuals and groups approach the relationship between religion and government policies. However, it is important to acknowledge that such labels inevitably obscure important nuances. People who might generally align with a particular category may hold views that do not fit neatly within it, and some may draw from multiple perspectives in forming their own beliefs. Additionally, some perspectives may not be fully captured by these four categories but are not necessarily any less sophisticated or well-reasoned.

With these caveats in mind, the goal of this section is not to provide rigid ideological boxes but rather to illuminate different approaches to the debate over religion in public life. By engaging with these perspectives, readers can better understand the range of arguments, reflect on their own views, and consider the implications of different policy choices. Whether one finds themselves agreeing with a particular perspective or challenging its assumptions, this section aims to foster thoughtful and constructive dialogue on an issue that continues to shape our public and political landscape.

1. *The Secular Liberal Viewpoint*

Liberal secularists argue that religion should not influence the government and public life beyond the freedom to practice (or not practice) whatever religion one chooses. As the basis for this argument, the Establishment Clause in the First Amendment is interpreted as restricting or forbidding government support of religious groups, symbols, or doctrine in the public sphere and to require the separation of church and state.¹⁸

There are many viewpoints represented within the liberal secularist tradition. Some believe that arguments citing religious views as justification for beliefs are not valid in the public sphere. Instead, public arguments should be made with a secular foundation to address America's religiously pluralist society. Others may respect religious beliefs as a foundation for viewpoints so long as a pluralist society is preserved through separation of the state from one dominant church or belief system.¹⁹

Another example of diversity among liberal secularists stems from the question of who should be considered a "secularist." Some argue that advocates for secularists can be religious or non-

¹⁸ Constitution Center, "The Establishment Clause," 2025. <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/amendments/amendment-i/interpretations/264>

¹⁹ Perry, MJ, "Religious Arguments in Public Political Debate," 1996. *Loyola of Los Angeles Law Review*. <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1975&context=llr>.

religious as long as they support separation of US governance from religion.²⁰ Others suggest that a distinction should be made between non-religiosity and secularism; that is, between those who are not engaged in religion and those who positively embrace secular beliefs and identities.²¹

The secular liberal perspective has a long history and is grounded in an extensive philosophical tradition that pre-dates current controversies. Nevertheless, many contemporary secular liberals are strong advocates for the separation of church and state across a wide range of domains. For example, the Secular Coalition for America cites key issues for secularists as upholding the Establishment Clause, holding religious and secular organizations accountable to the same tax exemption standards, ensuring that a medical provider's religion shouldn't prevent patients from receiving care, and more.²² It also argues that "taxpayer-funded, public schools have a constitutional obligation to teach an evidence and science-based curriculum that is religiously neutral and inclusive of all students."²³

Some contemporary secular liberals assert that Christian nationalism is a particularly dangerous threat to American democracy, as they believe its adherents have risen to important positions of power in US government.²⁴ An article in *Christianity Today* defines Christian nationalism as "the belief that the American nation is defined by Christianity, and that the government should take active steps to keep it that way."²⁵ As Andrew Seidel has argued, the rise of Christian nationalist ideas threatens religious minorities, religious pluralism in the United States, and the religious freedoms established in the First Amendment. He writes that this movement will "codify Christian privilege in the law, favoring Christians above all others."²⁶

2. The Religious Liberal Viewpoint

The traditional liberal perspective often emphasizes the separation of church and state, advocating for a public sphere free from overt religious influence. However, some religious liberals argue that religion should play a more active role in the public square and the formation of government policies. They believe religious values can promote social justice, address the

²⁰ Americans United For Separation of Church and State, "What is the Separation of Church and State?" 2025. <https://www.au.org/why-religious-freedom-matters/>

²¹ Layman, Geoffrey C., "Secularism and American Political Behavior," 2021. <https://academic.oup.com/poq/article/85/1/79/6310320>

²² Secular Coalition for America, "Key Issues," 2025. <https://secular.org/key-issues/>

²³ Secular Coalition for America, "Education," 2025. <https://secular.org/key-issue/education/>.

²⁴ Americans United For Separation of Church and State, "The Christian Nationalist attack on church-state separation is really an assault on religious freedom," 2024. <https://www.au.org/the-latest/articles/key-column-relfreedom/>

²⁵ Miller, Paul, "What Is Christian Nationalism?" *Christianity Today*, 2025. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2021/02/what-is-christian-nationalism/>

²⁶ Americans United For Separation of Church and State, "Why Religious Freedom Matters," 2025. <https://www.au.org/why-religious-freedom-matters/>. It is worth noting that while opposition to Christian nationalism might be most associated with secular liberalism, many religious citizens also oppose Christian nationalism.

moral dimensions of policy, and foster community and shared responsibility, making them a valuable addition to public life.

Religious liberalism integrates progressive social values with religious convictions, emphasizing inclusivity, justice, and moral responsibility. Religious liberals often view religion as a force for good, capable of addressing systemic injustices and inspiring societal change. Historically, religious movements have been central to liberal causes, such as the abolition of slavery and the civil rights movement. For example, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. drew upon Christian principles to advocate for racial equality, demonstrating how faith can be a powerful driver of social progress.²⁷

In addition to its historical role, religion continues to provide a compelling moral basis for addressing pressing issues such as poverty, climate change, and immigration. Religious liberals argue that policies addressing these challenges often have moral dimensions that secular frameworks alone may not fully capture. For instance, many environmental activists in religious circles frame their advocacy around the concept of stewardship, a principle rooted in various faith traditions.²⁸ This moral framing can inspire broader public support and galvanize action in ways purely secular arguments might not.

Religious liberals also view faith-based engagement as a way to counteract growing individualism and foster community. Religious institutions often serve as spaces where diverse individuals unite around shared values, creating networks that drive civic engagement and collective action. For example, interfaith coalitions working on homelessness demonstrate how religious organizations can mobilize resources and volunteers to address social challenges effectively.²⁹

Some religious liberals argue for a balanced approach to religion in public life where religion informs public discourse without imposing specific beliefs on others. By promoting principles of inclusivity and mutual respect, they aim to ensure that religious contributions enhance rather than undermine a pluralistic society. Ultimately, religious liberals see the public square as a place where religion can contribute to building a more just and compassionate society. In this view, by drawing upon its moral and community-building strengths, religion can enrich public life while respecting the diversity of beliefs in modern democracies.

3. The Secular Conservative Viewpoint

Conservatives skeptical of government-sponsored religion defend the vital role that churches and other religious institutions in American private life play to instill moral order and unifying ideals in the public but object to government influence over religious questions and disputes.

²⁷ Ambrosino, Brandon, "How Martin Luther King Jr.'s faith drove his activism." Vox, 2015.

<https://www.vox.com/2015/1/19/7852311/martin-luther-king-faith>

²⁸ Alpa, Becka. 2022. Involvement by religious groups in debates over climate change. Pew Research Center.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/11/17/sidebar-involvement-by-religious-groups-in-debates-over-climate-change/>.

²⁹ Interfaith Assembly on Homelessness and Housing, "Introduction to Interfaith Assembly's Life-skills Empowerment Work," 2025. <https://www.iahh.org/>.

Many secular conservatives point towards the beliefs expressed by America's founding fathers as evidence of the importance of limiting religious influence in public policy as not only a founding ideal but an integral driver of America's continued success. They argue preventing religious monopolization of policy conversations is essential to honoring tradition and the original intent of the Constitution.³⁰

Many who favor this perspective argue for the government's impartiality and robust protections for all private institutions. State favoritism for or against religiously affiliated institutions is a form of discrimination that should be prohibited.³¹ The government exists to promote the private rights of all individuals, regardless of their religious background. This is the principle that has and should continue to guide policy decisions about the religious issues currently dividing many Americans.³²

Secular conservatives oppose undue state intervention and believe that basing public policies on theological grounds would hinder the ability to determine moral answers that take into account the perspectives of people of all faiths and belief systems. In this view, keeping religion and policy in separate spheres enables people of different faiths to establish common ground on moral questions and guiding principles that transcend religious divisions. In this view, a moral order that is rooted in principles of nondiscrimination against either religiously affiliated or secular individuals is more stable rather than less so.³³ By ensuring that religion and policy remain separate, individuals of different faiths can respect one another's rights and contribute to government policies that work for everyone.

Contrary to conservatives in favor of introducing religion into the world of public policy, secular conservatives argue that the diversity of the United States makes it impossible for one faith to guide policy without alienating a majority of the population. Not only is separation of church and state highly popular across most demographics,³⁴ but the religious diversity of America underscores the difficulty of reaching a consensus if religion and public life become entangled. While Christians make up 70% of the American religious landscape, no major sect of Christianity

³⁰ See Jefferson, Thomas. "Jefferson's Letter to the Danbury Baptists." Library of Congress, 1802. <https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danpre.html>; Washington, George. "From George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, 18 August 1790." National Archives, 1790. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-06-02-0135>; and Green, Steven K. "The Supreme Court's Ahistorical Religion Clause Historicism." *Baylor Law Review*, 2021. <https://law.baylor.edu/sites/g/files/ecbvkj1546/files/2023-11/7%20Green.pdf>

³¹ Meyerson, Adam. "Family. Faith. Freedom." The Hoover Institution, 1997. <https://www.hoover.org/research/family-faith-freedom>

³² Oaks, Dallin H. "Going Forward With Religious Freedom & Nondiscrimination," University of Virginia, 2021. <https://www.religiousfreedomlibrary.org/documents/going-forward-with-religious-freedom-nondiscrimination>

³³ Jaffa, Harry V. "The American Founding as The Best Regime," *The Claremont Review of Books*, 2007. <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/digital/the-american-founding-as-the-best-regime/>

³⁴ Pew Research, "Far More Support Than Oppose Separation of Church and State," 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/10/28/in-u-s-far-more-support-than-oppose-separation-of-church-and-state/>

is more than 25% of the population.³⁵ If any of these groups sought to impose their strict beliefs on the public, it would likely alienate most of America and undermine the tradition of religious tolerance that has allowed Americans to coexist in relative harmony.³⁶

4. The Religious Conservative Viewpoint

Supporters of a religious conservative perspective emphasize the importance of religion in shaping public life, moral order, and government policies. They argue that religious freedom is a fundamental right that should extend beyond private worship into the public sphere, ensuring that individuals can express their faith and values in civic discussions and policymaking. Religion has historically provided moral guidance for society and continues to do so today.³⁷ Many religious conservatives contend that faith is not merely a private matter but a source of ethical clarity that should inform public decisions. To exclude religious perspectives from public discourse, they argue, would amount to discrimination against people of faith.³⁸ A key principle in this view is that while the state should not endorse one specific religion, it also should not suppress religious values in public affairs.

The U.S. Constitution protects religious expression, and many founders saw religion as essential to democracy, fostering civic virtue and social cohesion.³⁹ For example, George Washington stated in his Farewell Address that “religion and morality are indispensable supports” to political prosperity.⁴⁰ This perspective suggests that secularism should not mean the absence of religious values in public life but rather a framework that allows faith-based perspectives to contribute to national debates.

Religious conservatives believe that faith can inform public policy on critical moral issues such as abortion, marriage, and family structures. According to Richard Neuhaus, “Politics is in largest part a function of culture, and at the heart of culture is morality, and at the heart of morality is religion.”⁴¹ In this view, moral values derived from faith traditions provide objective, timeless truths that should guide policymaking. For instance, many religious conservatives argue that laws protecting the unborn uphold the moral principle that life is sacred.⁴² Similarly, they advocate for public policies that reinforce traditional family structures, believing that strong families are the foundation of a stable society.⁴³

³⁵ Pew Research, “Religious Landscape Study.” <https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/database/>

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Robert P. George. 2016. *Conscience and Its Enemies: Confronting the Dogmas of Liberal Secularism*. ISI Books.

³⁸ Stephen L. Carter. 1993. *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion*, Anchor Books.

³⁹ Mark David Hall, *Did America Have a Christian Founding?* (Thomas Nelson, 2019).

⁴⁰ George Washington, *Farewell Address*, 1796.

⁴¹ Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Eerdmans, 1984).

⁴² The Ethics of Abortion. The Pluralism Project. <https://pluralism.org/the-ethics-of-abortion>.

⁴³ Brown, Patrick. 2024. How Conservatives Can Promote Family Through Policy. Institute for Family Studies <https://ifstudies.org/blog/how-conservatives-can-promote-family-through-policy>.

They further argue that excluding religious perspectives from policymaking could weaken the moral fabric of society. They point to historical examples where religious movements played a positive role in shaping just policies—such as faith-based activism in the abolition of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement.⁴⁴ In this view, when religious values shape public policy, they contribute to the common good and uphold ethical standards that benefit society as a whole.

Setting Expectations (5 min.)

In this section, we will review the “Expected Outcomes,” “Deliberative Dispositions,” and “Conversation Agreements” below.

Expected Outcomes of the Conversation

The purpose of this deliberation is to listen to and share perspectives on what role religion should play in the public square and government policies. Over the course of our conversation, we will have the opportunity to listen to the perspectives of our fellow deliberators as well as share our own thoughts about the topic. Finally, we will have reflected on our conversation, our areas of agreement and disagreement, and what we have learned from our time together.

Deliberative Dispositions

The DCI has identified several “deliberative dispositions” as critical to the success of deliberative enterprises. When participants adopt these dispositions, they are much more likely to feel their deliberations are meaningful, respectful, and productive. Several of the Conversation Agreements recommended below directly reflect and reinforce these dispositions, which include a commitment to egalitarianism, open mindedness, empathy, charity, attentiveness, and anticipation, among others. A full list and description of these dispositions is available at <https://deliberativecitizenship.org/deliberative-dispositions/>.

Conversation Agreements

In entering into this discussion, to the best of our ability, we each agree to:

1. Be authentic and respectful
2. Be an attentive and active listener
3. Be a purposeful and concise speaker
4. Approach fellow deliberators’ stories, experiences, and arguments with curiosity, not hostility
5. Assume the best - and not the worst - about the intentions and values of others, and

⁴⁴ Ashrof, Mohamad. 2025. How Faith Helped To Abolish Slavery From The World? Countercurrents. <https://countercurrents.org/2025/01/how-faith-helped-to-abolish-slavery-from-the-world/>; Harvey, Paul. 2016. Civil Rights Movements and Religion in America. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion <https://oxfordre.com/religion/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-492>.

- avoid snap judgements
6. Demonstrate intellectual humility, recognizing that no one has all the answers, by asking questions and making space for others to do the same
 7. Critique the idea we disagree with, not the person expressing it, and remember to practice empathy
 8. Note areas of both agreement and disagreement
 9. Respect the confidentiality of the discussion
 10. Avoid speaking in absolutes (e.g., "All people think this," or "No educated people hold that view")

Getting to Know Each Other (5 min.)

In this section, we will take less than a minute to share our names and 2-3 aspects of our identities that are important to us. These could be our gender pronouns, our occupation, our family status (e.g., husband, mother, etc.), our hometown, our favorite hobby, etc.

If you are online, while there is no pressure to do so, everyone is welcome to type in any, all, or none of these aspects of your identity into your Zoom nameplate after your name (just right-click on your own image and click "Rename"). If you haven't already, we encourage you to turn on your video cameras to enable a more "face-to-face" conversation.

Personal Impressions of Religion and Public Life (10 min.)

In this section, we will share our initial thoughts on the relationship between religion and public life. Feel free to draw on arguments and data from the guide, the panel, or your own experience. We will each take about one minute to answer one of the questions below (your choice which one) without interruption or crosstalk. After everyone has spoken once, the group is welcome to continue discussing these questions as time allows or move on to the next set of questions in this section.

1. What does the term "religion in the public square" mean to you personally?
2. Are there core values that religion and public life should ideally uphold? What are they?
3. Can you share an example of where you've seen religion influence public life or government policies, either positively or negatively?

Evaluating Arguments about Religion and Public Life (20 min.)

Between this deliberation guide and our panel discussion, many different arguments about the relationship between religion and public life have been made. Let's take some time to understand, explore, and assess these arguments. We will each take about one minute to

answer one of the three questions below about religion and the public square without interruption or crosstalk. After everyone has spoken once, the group is welcome to continue discussing these questions as time allows or move on to the next set of questions about religion and the policy sphere.

Religion and the Public Square (~10 minutes):

1. Should religious beliefs be a guiding influence in the public square (the arena where public discourse, debate, and discussion take place)? Why or why not?
2. How should public life accommodate minority religions in contexts where a single religion dominates culturally or politically?
3. How can communities balance religious expression in public spaces with the principle of inclusivity for people of different faiths or no faith?

Religion and the Policy Sphere (~10 minutes):

1. Should religious principles directly influence government policies? If so, to what extent?
2. Are there specific policy areas (e.g., healthcare, education, social justice) where religion has—or should have—a stronger or weaker influence? Why?
3. Are there risks to democracy when one religious tradition heavily influences government policies?

Controversial Cases (15 min.)

Disagreement about the role of religion in public health often arises in the context of specific policies or policy domains. In this section, we will have the opportunity to discuss these dynamics in one or more of these domains that interest us. Let us first each take one minute or so to respond to one of the two questions below, and then we will explore the topics further with each other as time allows.

1. How should a government respond when religious beliefs conflict with policies designed to promote equality or public health (e.g., LGBTQ+ rights, vaccination mandates)?
2. What role should religion play in education in the United States? Should religious texts be taught in public schools? Should parents be able to pull their kids out of lessons that they claim violate their religious beliefs?

Reflections (10 min.)

While today's conversation is an important step in the journey, effectively responding to wealth and income disparities is necessarily an ongoing effort. Please reflect on the insights from your discussion with your fellow participants today, and then answer one of the questions below without interruption or crosstalk. After everyone has answered, the group is welcome to continue exploring additional questions as time allows.

1. What was most meaningful or valuable to you during this deliberation?
2. Where are the areas of both agreement and disagreement in your group?
3. Have any new ways to think about this issue occurred to you as we have talked today?
Any new ideas that might transcend our current way of conceiving of the problems and potential solutions?
4. Was there anything that was said or left out from the discussion that you think should be addressed with the group? Are there any perspectives missing from this conversation that you feel would be important to hear?
5. What did you hear that gives you hope for the future of conversations about religion in public life?
6. Is there a next step you would like to take based on the deliberation you just had?

About This Guide

Writers: Mae Corley '25, LJ Philips '25, Stephen Walker '26, Graham Bullock

Executive Editor: Graham Bullock

© Copyright 2025 Deliberative Citizenship Initiative (First Edition)

The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative

The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative (DCI) is dedicated to the creation of opportunities for Davidson students, faculty, staff, alumni, and members of the wider community to productively engage with one another on difficult and contentious issues facing our community and society. The DCI regularly hosts facilitated deliberations on a wide range of topics and organizes training workshops for deliberation facilitators. To learn more about these opportunities, visit www.deliberativecitizenship.org.

DCI Deliberation Guides

The DCI has launched this series of Deliberation Guides as a foundation for such conversations. They provide both important background information on the topics in question and a specific framework for engaging with these topics. The Guides are designed to be informative without being overwhelming and structured without being inflexible. They cover a range of topics and come in a variety of formats but share several common elements, including opportunities to commit to a shared set of Conversation Agreements, learn about diverse perspectives, and reflect together on the conversation and its yield. DCI staff, faculty, and students are the authors of these guides; generative AI is used to improve the clarity of the writing, identify errors, and provide background information, but all final text is confirmed by the authors. The DCI encourages conversations based on these guides to be moderated by a trained facilitator. After each conversation, the DCI also suggests that its associated Pathways Guide be distributed to the conversation's participants.

DCI Pathways Guides

For every Deliberation Guide, the DCI has also developed an associated Pathways Guide, which outlines opportunities for action that participants can consider that are related to the covered topic. These Pathways Guides reinforce the DCI's commitment to an action orientation, a key deliberative disposition. While dialogue and deliberation are themselves important contributors to a healthy democracy, they become even more valuable when they lead to individual or collective action on the key issues facing society. Such action can come in a range of forms and should be broadly understood. It might involve developing a better understanding of a topic, connecting with relevant local or national organizations, generating new approaches to an issue, or deciding to support a particular policy.

If you make use of this guide in a deliberation, please provide attribution to the Deliberative Citizenship Initiative, and email dc@deliberativecitizenship.org to tell us about your event. To access more of our growing library of Deliberation Guides, Pathways Guides and other resources, visit www.deliberativecitizenship.org/readings-and-resources.