

Question the Polarization Paradigm

“Polarization” is a term much in the news today. It refers to inter-group antagonisms that have become so fierce that they threaten the stability of the social order. It often is identified with race, religion, gender, economics, nationality, geography, political party, ideology and a host of other factors. It usually is thought of as *bi-polar* conflict in a zero-sum game: two sides are locked in a struggle for power in which there can only be winners and losers, oppressors and oppressed. If one is right, the other must be wrong. If one is good, the other must be bad. Religions have contributed to this depressing phenomenon in obvious ways. We exacerbate polarizing situations when we allow ego and expediency to overcome the fundamental thrust toward unity, and the values of humility, respect, forgiveness and compassion at the core of every faith.

One of the essential roles faith communities can play, however, is to question prevailing paradigms – in this case, the paradigm of polarization. What if there are not two “poles” but many? What other voices are not being heard? What if every conflict actually is also an opportunity for cooperation? What if “zero-sum” (win/lose) is precisely the opposite of the nature of the world we inhabit? (Robert Wright has synthesized a vast array of biological, anthropological, and historical data to suggest that a “non-zero-sum dynamic” crucially shaped the unfolding of life on earth and brought us to our present state of being.) If this is so, how can we turn inter-group conflict away from “your victory is my defeat” toward a more imaginative understanding of our common humanity in the face of daunting issues? Can our mutually threatening “identities” be seen as life enhancing and mutually enriching instead? As gifts we share with one another? How can we learn to loosen the grip we so tenaciously hold to this or that position, and recognize it as incomplete, imperfect and in need of supplementation? What fears and obstacles prevent us from reaching out to the “other” side? What unique resources do our faiths offer us for precisely this kind of challenge?

The *North American Interfaith Alliance* (NAIN) invites our constituent organizations and members across the continent to engage these questions. We urge you to create and conduct local initiatives to help move us beyond our present conflict-laden reality. Please document and record your efforts and share them with our network on our [Facebook page](#). Tell us what worked and what didn't work. What was most effective? What was least effective? What were the greatest barriers you faced? Your greatest accomplishments? Then keep checking back to see what others are doing and join us at the 2019 CONNECT where we will summarize the results.

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