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COMMENTARY
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DEDICATED TO DIALOGUE

Learning to Reconcile

BY GORDON BROWN AND JOHN SEXTON

Political discourse in many Western countries has broken down, making it difficult for people with different viewpoints to live amicably with one another. The Reconciliation League, an international initiative by 13 universities and colleges, aims to train a generation of leaders who can change that.

EDINBURGH—The United States, the United Kingdom, and many other countries currently suffer from toxic divisiveness. Our societies have fractured into political, social, and cultural camps, each certain that they possess the truth.

Ironically, while this secular dogmatism—as impervious to debate as religious doctrines traditionally were—has become more pervasive, religious leaders have started to see differences as an opportunity to build stronger communities rather than as threats.

To advance that approach, a number of prominent academics and public servants have helped create the Reconciliation League, an international association of 13 colleges and universities committed to preparing the next generation of leaders to engage thoughtfully and constructively across different perspectives.

The founding schools—the African Leadership University, the Asian University for Women, Brigham Young University, Fordham University, the University of Kentucky, Lafayette College, the London School of Economics and Political Science, Morgan State University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, New York University, Pomona College, San Carlos Apache College, and Yale University—have different histories, traditions, missions, and curricula. But each is dedicated both to academic excellence and to the League's mission.

Each member school will select a set of Reconciliation Fellows to participate in an immersive program in the summer of 2027. The 90 Fellows will learn the skills needed to discuss even the most contentious issues with anyone. These "bridge builders" will, hopefully, connect as friends and refine their thinking, while never being pushed toward any position. Each summer thereafter, similar cohorts of gifted leaders will complete the program and join a growing Reconciliation Corps that will convene virtually every quarter.

Talented faculty have designed the "anchor course" that all Fellows will take. It will use works of literature like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Shakespeare's *Othello* to discuss how difference is misconstrued as monstrosity. It will also teach a four-step process, drawn from the ecumenical movement, that has proven useful in generating understanding. First is seeing oneself accurately, before attempting to learn how your counterparts see themselves (on their terms) and how they see you. With this new understanding of how they view you, the last step is to strive—without being defensive—to draw lessons about how you might present your beliefs (or even yourself) differently and how the two of you might find common ground.

But that is not all. NYU's Carol Gilligan offered the fruits of her decades-long work studying the art of "radical listening" to the anchor course. Rabbi Irwin Kula, a master of ecumenical conversation, contributed the methods he has used to facilitate productive discourse among religious leaders. And Allyson Green, Dean Emeritus of NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, shared how to use the performing and creative arts as vehicles for narrowing differences.

Moreover, each participant will take a "traditional" course taught by a subject-matter expert in a way that emphasizes conversation across difference. Former Yale Law School dean Harold Hongju Koh will present case studies in diplomacy. NYU University Professor Joseph Weiler will apply various lenses to the trial of Jesus. Marcus Noyes of the University of Pittsburgh will examine chemistry and genetics as revealed in how bread is made in different cultures. And NYU's David and Denise Holland will offer lessons about our climate and civilization, drawing on their research on global sea-level rise in Greenland.

Midway through the academic program, the Fellows will go on ten-day retreats designed to bind them in a common enterprise. Some will raft 300 miles in the Grand Canyon; others will embed with the Apache Nation in Arizona. They will then reassemble to continue studying, reflect on their experiences, and design projects to implement what they have learned in their own communities. The following January, they will reconvene for a week to review successes and failures, to polish or redefine their projects, and to plan future activities.

Our experiences in politics and academia have shown that it is possible to maintain and build a healthy community among good-willed people from varied backgrounds and with different viewpoints. The differences that divide us can never be fully dissolved. But if our leaders have the right self-awareness and perspective-taking skills, the community will be richer and better for the effort.

There are many historical examples of overcoming such differences. After the American colonies revolted against the British Empire 250 years ago, the Marquis de Lafayette's arrival injected fresh energy and talent into their cause, helping them secure victory. In Britain, Lord North was serving as prime minister when it became clear that the Crown had lost. Yet the US and the UK went on to develop a "special relationship." Fittingly, the Reconciliation Fellows will gather at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania and on the Wroxton College campus that was Lord North's home and now will serve as the League's permanent headquarters.

But generosity must underpin rapprochement. Not far from Wroxton is Coventry, which in 1940 endured 11 hours of German bombing that killed at least 500 people and destroyed 43,000 buildings, including its medieval cathedral. Almost immediately after, the city's civic and religious leaders committed to seeking reconciliation, not revenge. That decision to maintain the ruins as a symbolic reminder of what can go wrong while constructing, side by side, a new cathedral that points to a better future is portrayed in this video. Today, Coventry is officially a "reconciliation city" and hosts an annual peace festival.

Such examples can be replicated on a much broader scale. That will require more leaders with the skills to bridge our divisions. The Reconciliation League will show that these skills can be learned.

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