

Chapter 9

All in the Family: How Should Religion Communicators Understand Relationships When Conflicts Arise?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter suggests that religion communicators examine their understanding of relationship in terms of their faith perspectives. Do communicators create relationships by building consensus and communities of belief, or did God establish relationships between people by creating the human family? Ideas hold communities of belief together. Disagreements threaten community bonds. The majority works to maintain consensus and silence dissent. Family connections tolerate disunity. Even when people disagree, they remain family members. The main threat to the family is loss of dialogue. Diverse family members want to engage different viewpoints to discern truth. Seeing relationships in family terms could have theological and practical appeals for religion communicators as they try to resolve conflicts, foster cooperation, and manage dialogues with publics. Religion communicators, especially those from Abrahamic faiths, might approach family disputes differently from the win-lose asymmetrical standpoint often seen in business. Religion communicators could downplay instrumental practices based solely on persuasion and consensus. Religion communicators could focus on generating robust dialogue, hearing all sides of an issue, and discerning God's truths.

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INTRODUCTION

Relationships are at the heart of Abrahamic religions. Hutton (1999) called managing strategic relationships the central organizing principle of public relations. Attention to relationships gains special importance when emergencies or conflicts arise (Broom, 2008; Wilcox & Cameron, 2009). Ehling and Dozier (1992) said, “(P)ublic relations management must be viewed as engaging in problem-solving and decision-making activities as they relate to the actual or potential disputes or conflicts” (p. 256).

The evolution of social networks in the early 21st century has complicated both public relations and conflict resolution. Online channels like Facebook, Flickr, Foursquare, Google Plus, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Twitter, and YouTube have altered the way some people of faith and many public relations practitioners look at both human connections and ties between organizations and social groups (Breakenridge, 2012; Drescher & Anderson, 2012). Three recent survey results (Cannon, 2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2013), however, showed that religion communicators in the United States did not rank social-media work among their top 10 daily tasks. Respondents to one questionnaire did not see managing conflicts with external publics among the primary responsibilities of communicators. Practitioners in all three surveys focused more on technical aspects of communication than on nurturing relationships with internal and external publics. Survey respondents said they spent little time researching key publics.

Even if religion communicators are not involved in the response, faith groups do deal with conflicts. Church infighting and clashes

with secular groups have been common within the Christian movement, for example, since New Testament days. During early 2013 in the United States, faith groups made headlines concerning disputes over immigration legislation (Jordan, 2013; Townsend, 2013), opening Boy Scouts of America membership to homosexuals (Evans, 2013; Goodale, 2013), and same-sex marriage (Peoples, 2013).

Grunig and White (1992) say the way public relations practitioners work reflects their worldview of what their discipline is and does. Grunig and White defined worldviews as “assumptions that practitioners and theorists have about such things as morality, ethics, human nature, religion, politics, free enterprise, or gender” (p. 32). Worldviews focus people’s attention on interpretations of events that fit those assumptions. Deatherage and Hazleton (1998) provided empirical support for Grunig and White’s worldview claim. Deatherage and Hazleton found that worldviews could be reliably measured and that they correlated to which public relations models (press agency, public information, two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical; Grunig & Hunt, 1984) practitioners followed. Grunig (1989) said the four models could be collapsed into two worldviews: asymmetrical and symmetrical.¹ The asymmetrical perspective reflected thinking behind the press agency, public information and two-way asymmetrical models. This worldview, the dominant one in business, sees public relations as a technical function, not a management responsibility. The purpose of asymmetrical public relations is to get people to do what an organization wants without the organization having to change behavior or to compromise. The symmetrical worldview assumes that a norm of reciproc-

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