

A Time to Stand: The Christian Faith and the Conflict of Civilizations

*Adapted from an address given at Hillsdale College, Michigan, in 1994.
by Os Guinness, Ph.D., Senior Fellow of the Trinity Forum*

Today the Swedish town of Uppsala is surrounded by corn fields, but once the sea lapped at its inhabitants' doors. People have settled there for five thousand years. In about the eleventh century A.D. the last of the pagan temples was built and stood for a hundred years, only a few yards away from the first of the Christian churches. These institutions repeatedly clashed; eventually the Christian faith won and paganism receded. But as the modern tour guides will tell you, it is the church in Sweden and, indeed, in many nations of the West, that is receding and paganism that is resurgent in the late twentieth century.

Though it is the most nearly universal religion in most parts of the world, the Christian faith has certainly lost significant ground. Some, in fact, would say that it is all over for it. Following Friedrich Nietzsche's parable of the madman or Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach," they would say that the Christian faith, clashing with modernity, is receding and dying. And more than a few church officials would agree. But others insist that the Christian faith is on the verge of winning the world. They would cite recent, powerful evidence in sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union.

I would argue that the first group, proclaiming demise, has lost touch with the gospel, and that the second, pronouncing success, has lost sight of modernity. I belong to a third group, the "orthodox" among Protestants and Catholics who could be described as having "sober confidence." The orthodox are sober because of the immense challenge of modernity – the greatest challenge the church has ever faced – but confident because of the truth, meaning, and power of the Christian gospel. I don't pretend to be neutral on this. I am an Englishman by nationality, a social scientist by training, a follower of Christ by faith, and an Anglican evangelical by tradition.

Having made these disclaimers, I want to present a series of brief propositions about the Christian faith, the coming conflict of civilizations, and the reawakening I foresee.

[M]odernity is different: It is the most powerful civilization produced by human beings so far and the first that is genuinely global. It is not tied to a continent, religion, conqueror, or single set of ideas, but is based primarily on revolutions of a different sort.

Proposition 1: There are three major revolutions that comprise the challenge of modernity.

I spoke at the World Congress on Evangelism in Manila a few years ago, and after speaking on modernity and mission, an elderly missionary came up to me and said, “I didn’t hear what you said, and I couldn’t understand everything I heard, but why on earth did they ask a man to speak on maternity?” There is enormous confusion about modernity today, but it is really no more subtle than the word *maternity*.

Modernity is the spirit and system of our modern world as produced by the forces of modernization. We often think of the story of human beings in terms of civilizations – Assyrian, Babylonian, Chinese, Indian, Inca, Greek, Roman, Spanish, French, British, American, and so on. Each civilization is, of course, powerful in its own time and region. But modernity is different: It is the most powerful civilization produced by human beings so far and the first that is genuinely global. It is not tied to a continent, religion, conqueror, or single set of ideas, but is based primarily on revolutions of a different sort.

The first of these revolutions is capitalism, which, according to different estimates, began to flourish in the twelfth, fifteenth, or eighteenth century. The second is industrialized technology, which began in England in the late 1700s. The third is telecommunications, started with the invention of the telegraph and the photograph in the 1800s and continuing today with the information superhighway, virtual reality, and the extraordinary conglomerates of business, information, and entertainment.

Our place in these three revolutions is obvious: If the nineteenth century was “the British century,” as it is often called, the twentieth has been, in Henry Luce’s words, “the American century.” The challenge of these revolutions, however, is less obvious. Take capitalism, for example. Although social scientist Peter Berger is an unashamed proponent of capitalism, he says that, following the second Russian revolution of 1989, capitalism now faces its greatest challenge: itself. Capitalism’s runaway success is undermining the very values that helped to produce it.

Proposition 2: There are three main laboratory experiments in which to observe the interaction of modernity and the world civilizations

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the big question was, “Who killed communism?” Most people said, “Obviously, democratic freedom and ideals.” Others pointed out the vital role of religion – faith and prayer. And some cited modernity itself: modern media, travel, and communications, which have opened up not just traditional societies but totalitarian societies. Sure, there were some incarnations of Marx, Lenin, and the Big Brother like Gorbachev, but they now had American Express cards. And there were the brave, heroic students in Tiananmen Square who were receiving fax messages from southern California.

Modernity helped greatly to undo Marxism, one of the three great experiments. The first experiment was and still is Western democratic capitalism, which has arisen from a Jewish and Christian background and which is flowing with rather than against the tide of modernity. The second experiment, totalitarian socialism, is no longer around in the Soviet form, but vestiges remain. It is a hundred fifty years younger than the first experiment, arises out of a secular rather than a Judeo-Christian background, and is more ambivalent in its relationship with modernity. The third experiment is East Asian capitalism in Japan and the so-called “little dragons”: Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Korea. Arising from a Confucian background, it also borrows from Western influences and like democratic capitalism, flows with the tide of modernity.

From the Judeo-Christian perspective, Confucianism and the religion of Islam are taking the place of the challenge of Marxism.

Proposition 3: There are three perspectives on history that are needed to help us understand today’s situation.

All are important, but the most needed is the most rare. The first is short-range perspective, concentrating on events and individuals. It is about Plato and philosophy, da Vinci and the arts, Dante and Shakespeare and literature, Newton and science, and so on. The second is medium-range perspective, focusing on periods, convergences, turning points, and ideas. It is about the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, romanticism, modernism, postmodernism, and so on. The third is long-range perspective, focusing on continents, centuries, and millennia. This perspective of the reflective past deals with the foundations of civilizations, the contours of human life, and the defining features of empires.

Today in America most people only have a short-range perspective. Two comments illustrate this point. In the 1970s, an American businessman was sitting next to Chou En-lai, the prime minister of China since 1949, at a state banquet. Being very embarrassed and not knowing what to say, he fumbled around for about several minutes and finally ventured a question: “As a Chinese revolutionary, what do you think of the French Revolution in 1789?”

Chou was silent for even longer than he had been before the question was posed. Finally he turned to the businessman and said, “For us Chinese, it is too soon to say.” He was undoubtedly teasing, but his comment illustrates the differences of the typical American perspective. Along this line journalist Bill Moyers adds that most Americans are so prone to get information from television that they know everything about the last twenty-four hours, not much about the last twenty-four years, and next to nothing about the last twenty-four centuries.

Proposition 4: There are three global trends or reactions that are earned around the world by modernity.

The first is geopolitical. In one sense, this trend is a shift from totalitarianism to tribalism; in another sense, it is a shift from globalization, which is still continuing, to localization. One could give various reasons, but surely this lies behind the tragic rise of the “mini-holocaust” – the humanitarian nightmare, the witches’ brew of ancient hatreds that we have seen recently in places like Bosnia and Rwanda and have experienced to some extent in our own country. America has its own group grievances, hatred, and tribalism.

The second trend is more philosophical. The shift in the last generation has been from “modernism” to “postmodernism.” The modernist’s absolute faith in reason, science, technology, and humanism has given way to disillusionment, relativism, and cynicism. Every country in the modern world has experienced this. Even where the philosophy doesn’t quite reach, its consequences are still felt because of the power of the media and the consumer culture.

The third trend is ethical. We have abandoned a theistic understanding of right and wrong in favor of a therapeutic understanding. “Wrong” is no longer defined as a wrong before God but as a “crime” before the law; today it is a “sickness” or even a “problem of low self-esteem,” according to psychology.

Proposition 5: There are three great cultural revolutions carried within the forces of modernization.

One is the graphics revolution, which has led to the triumph of images over words, much trumpeted by thinkers like Camille Paglia. Until recently, most people had few images in their lives apart from nature; words were predominant. But now we are bombarded with bumper stickers, billboards, and screen images. Words, by and large, have become accessories to images and have lost their authority under the impact of the graphics revolution.

The second revolution, the information revolution, has given rise to the triumph of information over wisdom and responsibility. Our modern digital processing has given us a kind of technological Tower of Babel. The effect of this “all-at-onceness,” as Daniel Boorstein says, is the creation of a new person: “*Homo up to datum*.” But as he concludes, *Homo up to datum* is a dunce, because with all the information flooding over him daily, he has forgotten what to do with it. He has lost touch with wisdom.

The third revolution is the marketing revolution, leading to the triumph of style over substance. In the past, style was always the outward *expression* of the inner character. But today through the triumph of the images in a consumerist form, style is the surface and the substance below is simply not considered interesting. In modern America, in fact, style is the only way many individuals – and many firms marketing products – gain an identity at all.

Proposition 6: There are three main pressures exerted on religion by modernity.

The debate here has been confusing and controversial. The early readings of the impact of modernity and religion were wrong, but at least they took account of the fact that modernity has had a greater effect on religious belief than any other external force. One hundred and fifty years after the debate first began, there is a general consensus over the three main pressures exerted by modernization on religion.

The first pressure is secularization – not to be confused with secularism, which is a philosophy. This process, by which successive sectors of modern society have been “liberated” from the

decisive influence of religious ideas and institutions, has resulted in most parts of the world in religion being marginalized. In a way, religion becomes like Lewis Carroll's famous Cheshire cat: The body disappears but the grin remains.

The second pressure is privatization – not to be confused with the means of undoing nationalization of property and services. Privatization, when it touches religion, is the process by which a cleavage is produced between the public and private spheres of life. The private sphere is naturally favored, as it is the place where individual freedom, fulfillment, and religion flourish. Under this form of privatization, religion becomes privately engaging but publicly irrelevant.

The third pressure is pluralization, the extraordinary multiplication of options through choice and change, including at the level of worldviews, ideologies, and faith. But with each acceleration of choice and change, nervousness and uncertainty corrode commitment.

Proposition 7: There are three significant revivals stimulated by modernity, which will be ominous for the Christian faith.

Modernity, I would stress here, is not anti-religious. Some religions, like Hinduism and the New Age movement, find it quite congenial. But it is hostile toward the biblical family of faith, including the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths, each of which demands an integration with the whole of life.

Modernity first reinforces the revival of polytheism – the worship of many gods. For example, there is a clear trend in American society toward worshiping the environment as Mother Earth.

The second revival is of gnosticism, the ancient faith holding that all “matter” is evil and all “spirit” is good, and that salvation comes only from secret knowledge granted to initiates. The new gnosticism is reinforced by the information revolution, which provides access to knowledge in many forms, from hypertext to virtual reality. There is a severe discounting of the body and an esoteric interest in the mind.

The third revival is of paganism, which may be traced through the therapeutic revolution and

particularly through the rise of Freudian and Jungian psychological theories. The first, Freudian theory, attacks all forms of religion as mania. The second, Jungian theory, is not opposed to religion but leads in a very different direction than Christian orthodoxy – toward natural impulses, spiritualism, and the demonic, which are far closer to the new paganism.

Proposition 8: There are three main storm fronts where the brunt of modernity is coming down on the Christian church: Japan, Western Europe, and the United States.

The state of the gospel on two of these fronts is especially disheartening: Japan has never ever been won to Christ, and Western Europe has been won twice and lost twice, with the church not doing very well there today. But the United States is where the battle for the Christian faith in the modern world is pivotal.

Why is this so? Four reasons stand out: first, much of the meaning of the modern world is wrapped up in the meaning of America. Second, the American church has been and is today bearing the brunt of the attack against the Christian faith. And the third reason is that the American people have, more than any other people, endured the fiery brook of modernity. Today a third generation has stood the test of faith. And fourth, America, despite her very real problems, is the strongest nation in the world – spiritually, theologically, numerically, financially, and culturally.

Proposition 9: There are three choices concerning religion in the public square in America.

One extreme choice is to argue for a sacred public square; that is, a public square where one religion or ideology is preferred and semi-established. Under the conditions of today's pluralism, this choice would be unjust and unworkable. By the way, it is important to note that this applies to the religion of secularism just as much as it does to any conventional religion.

The other extreme is the naked public square, where all religions and ideologies are ostensibly squeezed out. This would be equally unjust and unworkable, mainly because it would not be consistent. One religion or ideology would creep back in. It would also leave the public square with no moral justification. But the pressure for the naked public square comes from two powerful sources, one being those individuals who demand neutrality in public life for whatever

high-minded reason, even though neutrality is impossible. The other source – and it is sometimes comprised of the same individuals – feels revulsion against extremist ways of bringing religion into the public square.

The third choice is to create a civil public square; in other words, a public square open to citizens of all faiths to enter and engage in public life on the basis of their own commitments and presuppositions, within constitutional limits and with civility. A respect for truth, other people, and the rights and responsibilities of a common vision for the common good would prevail. Now, as we can see only too clearly during every election year, civility is almost washed away in America, becoming for many people a wimp word. But you only need to go to the former Soviet Union or South Africa to realize that civility is a precious commodity.

Proposition 10: There are three choices concerning individual citizens in the public square.

In the first extreme are the “tribespeople.” They enter public life without concern for the common good because of their solidarity and allegiance to their own group. Tribespeople can be seen in such sayings as, “it’s a *black* thing.” Or simply substitute for black the word *feminist, gay, handicapped, fundamentalist*

... Too many Christians and non-Christians have gone along with this balkanization.

In the other extreme are the “idiots.” They are not mentally deficient but, according to the Greek definition of the word, are people who have a purely private understanding of everything, including the public square. In ancient times, idiots entered and fought for their own interests and ideas, regardless of others. They were equally careless about the common good but from an individualistic rather than a tribal perspective.

In the third option are the “citizens,” the people who know well their interests and agendas, but fight not just because of them but because of their deep sense of commitment to the rights and responsibilities of the common vision for the common good.

Proposition 11: There are three stances for believers in relation to modernity.

The story of the Christian faith is the story of a two-thousand-year conversation between the church and the world. Christians are called to be in the world but not of it, or, as the early church put it, to plunder the Egyptians, but not to set up the golden calf. Of course, during the last two millennia, some Christians have gotten too close to the world and have compromised; some, in turn, have retreated too far from the world and been irrelevant. But modernity has taken those extremes to a new stage; the responses are now more exaggerated and adopting the middle position is harder than ever.

One extreme is to accommodate and finally surrender to the modern world. Many trace this stance in its modern form to Friedrich Schleiermacher and his attempt to reach the “cultured despisers” of the gospel. Indeed, much of the story of liberalism has been about ending up too close to the “enemy.” This was certainly one of the reasons for the suicide of liberalism and the rise of the “God is dead” movement in the sixties. In other words, a process of uncritical accommodation leads to surrender. Finally what remains is not the Christian gospel, but another gospel.

The other extreme is defiance, leading to withdrawal and finally to irrelevance in the world. This stance is often seen in the Jewish ghetto and the Anabaptist subculture, which are totally divorced from the surrounding culture. But this stance is becoming harder and harder to maintain because modernity is so powerful and pervasive.

The third stance is what sociologist Peter Berger calls “bargaining” – those who dine with the devil of modernity had better have long spoons. Two features to the challenge of bargaining are prominent. One is critical discrimination, for without it one cannot pick and choose between things in a way that is mature and wise. The second feature is constructive transformation. In biblical terms, one must be salt and light. We penetrate through our engagement and slowly transform, producing more truth, justice, beauty, and freedom than was there before.

Proposition 12: There are three prevalent deficiencies in American discipleship as it seeks to cope with modernity.

The real challenge to religious believers is to maintain their integrity, effectiveness, and above all, the integration of their faith with every part of their lives.

One deficiency was mentioned earlier: privatization. Because of the very nature of modernity, faith becomes privately engaging, publicly irrelevant. In a word, privatization lacks a sense of totality.

The second deficiency is politicization. Many Christians – reacting to privatization by rocketing out of the closet into the culture – define politics as the be-all-and-end-all of their Christian obedience. But if privatization lacks totality because it is restricted to the private sphere, politicization, in a word, lacks tension, the critical sense of being *in*, but not *of* the world.

The third deficiency is pillarization, a word that goes back to nineteenth-century Holland. The Dutch response to pluralism was to allow all cultures to “do their own thing.” There were Protestant and Catholic churches, schools, universities, newspapers, labor unions, and so on. The same was true for the humanists, but without the churches. The effect was a pillarized nation. It was a much more consistently, coherently, and creatively Christian nation, but it lacked transformation. There was a tendency to withdraw from society, build up the Christian this-that-and-the-other, and no longer engage strategically and penetratingly with Dutch culture. In the end, Holland went “soft,” as the saying goes, and was secularized from within. You can see a similar pillarization in America today, with the lure of going back to the basics.

The real challenge to religious believers is to maintain their integrity, effectiveness, and above all, the integration of their faith with every part of their lives.... Our faith should not just be reserved for church or home but for law school, the CEO's office, the factory floor, and every other inch of life where a disciple goes.

Proposition 13: There are three essential requirements to overcoming modernity.

The first is transcendence in faith and worship. G.K. Chesterton remarked at the turn of the century that the worldview of the average modern man was like that of a slightly drowsy, middle-aged businessman right after a good lunch. In other words, as Peter Berger put it more prosaically, we live in a world without windows where the ordinary has become the only reality and many individuals are atheists unawares, except for the religious language they still use.

I gave some lectures on a different aspect of modernity in Australia a few years ago. A CEO came up to me and said: “Now I understand something. I was sharing my faith with a Japanese

CEO and he said to me, 'I'm not impressed by what I see. Every time I meet a Buddhist monk, I meet a holy man in touch with an unseen world. When I meet a Christian missionary, I meet a manager.'" In both faith and worship in America, there is a profound loss of transcendence in much of our belief.

The second requirement is integration in all our callings. Dualism in the church has a long history, going back to the fourth century when the spiritual was considered higher and there was a compartment between the spiritual and the secular. The spiritual was the "perfect" life and the secular was the "permitted" life. But in the sixteenth century, Martin Luther blew that theory apart, arguing that everyone, everywhere, in everything they did, were as unto God. The Puritans agreed with this and did much to spread Luther's view. Today, however, the notion of dualism has crept back into our society through privatization and such notions as full-time Christian service and so on. Thus the central challenge to faith in the modern world is the challenge to integration. Our faith should not just be reserved for church or home but for law school, the CEO's office, the factory floor, and every other inch of life where a disciple goes.

The third requirement is persuasion in our witness and communication. Persuasion has always been at the heart of the Christian gospel and the expansion of the church through much of its two thousand years. It has also been at the heart of the story of America, particularly as it has faced the challenge of pluralism. But the last two generations have seen the death of persuasion and the rise of a form of faith lacking this essential quality. It is easy to understand why many of the so-called communications or witnessing methods cropped up in the 1940s and 1950s when most people talked in a Christian language and there was no need to persuade. People were open and interested. Today, however, central sectors of society are secularized, private life is pluralized, and fewer and fewer people speak in Christian terms.

The lack of persuasion is now fatal, and what was once kept at the level of witnessing has now spilled over into politics. Look at the pro-life movement, for example. Loaded terms abound, from "pro-life extremists" on one side to "baby-killers" on the other. There is almost no attempt to persuade hearts and minds, no winning of culture. Yet persuasion in communication is one of the prime needs of the modern world.

These, I believe, are just some of the elements of the discussion at the end of the second millennia of the Christian faith and the challenges it faces. The supreme challenge is of modernity, but there are also the challenges of ancient civilizations themselves being awakened by modernity. This is no time for despair, or complacency, or pessimism, or cynicism. It is a time to stand, a time to speak, a time to act.

Proposition 14: There are three grounds for an unshakable Christian confidence in the face of modernity.

I recall a seminar at Oxford in the early 1970s, highlighted by a discussion between an eminent European sociologist and an eminent philosopher of Marxism. Both men predicted that Marxism, which was then seriously declining, had no hope for any renewal within itself. But they added that the Christian church, with all its faults and problems, had three advantages making renewal possible.

One advantage is that in the Word of God we have a judgment that transcends history and culture. Though the church has throughout the generations fallen captive – the greatest metaphor is the Babylonian captivity – it has held on to a large measure of God’s truth. And when his Word speaks, it is a Word that transcends history and culture, awakening even the dead.

The second advantage is, ironically, a belief in sin. Christians have a doctrine of their own failure. At the heart of the gospel is the reality that all of us often go wrong. And although we would like to forget it (and in our pride and arrogance often do), that doctrine is always there to confront us and bring us back so that we can repent.

The third advantage is the number of awakenings and revivals among Christians over the last two thousand years. This is particularly true in America with its powerful, historic precedents. Indeed, the story of America is virtually the story of awakenings and revivals. It is important to note that they were never purely private: Individual lives were changed, families were changed, schools were changed, neighborhoods were changed, communities were changed, and cities were changed with a ripple effect that went nationwide. It is no accident that many of today’s leading scholars, such as Irving Kristol and James Q. Wilson, argue that it is only through revival that some of the deepest dimensions of our cultural crises can be remedied. G.K. Chesterton put it much more simply a generation ago, “Five times the church has gone to the dogs, but each time it was the dogs that died.”

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We probably all have our own favorite examples of stands: Elijah's before the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel in the Old Testament, Martin Luther at the Wittenburg door on the second day of the Diet of Worms in 1521, Don John at the Battle of Lopeno in 1571, and so on. Let me share with you one that is not a Christian example but is still deeply stirring. It is the stand of Leonidas I, the prince of Sparta in 480 B.C.

Do you know the history of that time? Xerxes, the so-called "king of kings," was the emperor of Persia and his army was sweeping across the Hellespont to attack Greece. The main target was Athens, but Athens was not yet the shining city of Pericles. Rather it was just a little city that had a genius for annoying empires. And when the Persians flowed through, the Greek league managed to put in its way seven thousand soldiers under the generalship of Leonidas, the prince of Sparta. They faced the biggest army the world had ever seen, far more than one hundred thousand invaders sweeping down upon them.

They took their position at a place which in English is called "hot gates," the pass of Thermopylae, where five-thousand-foot mountains fall off sharply to meet the sea. For four days, Leonidas and his men held the pass and kept the Persians away from Greece as Xerxes sent his best troops against them; finally sending the Immortals, who also fell back. But inevitably a traitor betrayed the Greeks, who woke up on the fifth day to find themselves surrounded. Leonidas knew what he was facing, and, of the seven thousand, he dismissed all but three hundred, his own Spartans, who were known for fierce fighting – and winning or dying, as it was said. They made their stand on a little mound you can still see today. They fought to the last man, and they died.

But before they died, Leonidas sent back this message to Sparta, "Stranger, tell the Spartans that we have behaved as they would wish us to behave, and we are buried here." Magnificently laconic, understated, and certainly not melodramatic, but effective. As he lay dying, Leonidas had no idea that, in the following year, five thousand Spartans would beat the huge army of the Persians. He had no idea that in thirty years the Athens of Pericles, Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus would begin to flower. He had no idea that when he stood that day in 480 B.C. on the line of freedom, he was making a difference – a difference that we can truly say affects our freedom all these thousands of years later.

There is no one place we can make a stand today; there is no one enemy. Yet we can and must confront the challenge of modernity, which is really a challenge to the integrity and effectiveness of our faith. We can and must trust only in what we know to be true.

We must make our stand in our own place in time and leave the outcome to God. May it be said of us, as it was said of the Spartans, "Stranger, tell our people that we have behaved as they would wish us to behave, and we are buried here."

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Os Guinness was born in 1941 in Hsiang Cheng, [China](#) , where his parents were medical missionaries. He is a great-great-great grandson of

[Arthur Guinness](#)

, the Dublin brewer and founder of the

[Guinness family](#)

. In 1943 he survived the Henan famine in which five million died, including his two brothers. He returned to England in 1951 when most foreigners left China after the climax of the Chinese Revolution in 1949.

He received a [B.D.](#) (honours) from the University of London in 1966 and a [D.Phil](#) in social sciences from

[Oriental College, Oxford](#)

in 1981. In 1984 Guinness came to the United States, where he was first a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center, and then a Visiting Fellow at the Brookings Institution. From 1985-88 he was Executive Director of the Williamsburg Charter Foundation, and the lead drafter of the

[Williamsburg Charter](#)

, celebrating the genius of the First Amendment and setting out the signers' vision of a civil public square. His deep concern has been to bridge the chasm between academic knowledge and popular knowledge, taking things that are academically important and making them intelligible and practicable to a wider audience, especially as they concern matters of public policy.

In 1991, Guinness founded the [Trinity Forum](#) , an organization that hosts forums for senior leaders in business and politics. He served as a senior fellow at The Trinity Forum from

1991–2004, and has also spoken widely at many universities, and business and political conferences throughout the world. co-author of the public school curriculum “Living With Our Deepest Differences,” Guinness has written or edited more than twenty five books, including *Invitation to the Classics*

,
The American Hour

,
The Call

, and
Long Journey Home

. His most recent book is "The Case for Civility" (Harper One, 2008). He currently lives in Virginia with his wife, Jenny.