

**Stony Brook University
The Graduate School**

Doctoral Defense Announcement

Abstract

Conviction and Responsibility:
How Committing to Conscience Can Foster Political Consideration

By

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There is little in our lives more important to us than our convictions and few things more desirable than being able to live by them. Our convictions provide us with a sense of purpose and direction. They give our pursuits meaning and value. They play a vital role in the development and perpetuation of our self-conception, operating as a cornerstone of our identity. But within pluralistic societies, actually seeking to live by our convictions is perhaps the single most influential generator of social conflict. Precisely because we share an abiding desire to stand up for what we believe, the competition to be able to do so has led to political conditions marked by acute political polarization, which reflexively makes it increasingly difficult to live by our convictions without fear of persecution.

In order to address this concern, political philosophers commonly suggest that steps must be taken to prevent conflicts over matters of conviction from entering public debate. If this can be accomplished, they claim, the risk of a polarized polity is effectively mitigated. I argue, however, that demanding as much has precisely the opposite effect. I hereby develop a conception of political engagement that is intentionally not directed toward avoiding conflicts over matters of conviction. The perpetuation of such conflicts is not in itself particularly problematic. What matters instead is how citizens engage in them. Once we better understand what is entailed in accepting the responsibility to uphold our convictions—or in committing to conscience—we see that citizens are best served by engaging in politically considerate (i.e., civil and respectful) political interactions with allies and opponents alike.

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