

Westar Institute

Ethos & Protocols

The Jesus Seminar began in 1985 with conventional academic protocols borrowed from the professional societies. Very soon, however, the Seminar developed its own ethos in which a fundamental modification of academic habits emerged. The Jesus Seminar ceased being a debating society arguing about ideas and became a new kind of academic community.

New Fellows occasionally report that they have found it difficult to “break in” to the Westar community. This is likely justified and requires both that long-time Fellows help to initiate new ones into the ethos of Westar seminars and, at the same time, that new Fellows join the common conversation and adopt our basic protocols. The bonds formed between and among Fellows constitute an essential ingredient in our work.

The following is a sketch of the essential ethos and protocols that inform the work of Westar Seminars.

Literacy that matters

Westar is dedicated to religious literacy—biblical, historical, and theological—along with other ancillary literacies. Literacy is essential, but it has to be literacy that matters, literacy that makes a difference. Learning merely to reinforce old dogmas or confirm one’s biases will not suffice. The knowledge we hope to produce should open up new ways of thinking about the past and living into the future.

A common conversation

Genuine literacy is linked to a common conversation, a focused conversation. A common conversation requires a common subject, and a common method or strategy in exploring that subject. Conversations lose their focus and deplete their energy when they lack a specific goal, one that is sufficiently well defined to make it possible to say we have or have not reached it; in short, to specify the outcomes of our conversations.

Honesty is foundational

Honesty is the foundational value that permeates the collective behavior of the Fellows. We have learned to be ruthlessly honest about what we believe and why we believe it. Our first step was to practice a rigorous honesty in our exchanges with each other. Then we had to learn to be up front and candid with the broader public as we spoke and wrote for that public.

Conversation is cumulative

The conversation that is characteristic of the Westar community is cumulative: it builds on itself as it moves along from one stage to another. For a conversation to be cumulative, sustained participation is a necessary ingredient.

When the Jesus Seminar (and other Westar seminars) first began, Fellows were permitted to vote whether or not they had read the papers or attended meetings. Then resistance to this practice welled up and we discontinued it. The reason was clear: Sustained participation in the common conversation made an essential difference in the quality and course of our deliberations.

Operate out of a consensus

The Westar community operates out of a consensus. The reason for consensus is to achieve some tangible results, rather than indulge an endless parade of unresolved problems. We always attempt to come to some conclusions, no matter how provisional or tentative. We establish those conclusions by secret ballot, as a rule. Members do not have to agree with the majority but, as a part of the community, members try to represent the consensus fairly in public presentations.

We decided to try and identify the knowledge we held in common rather than simply traffic in our differences and private opinions. We came to the conclusion that diversity for diversity's sake is seriously overrated. Nevertheless, we agreed to continue to challenge every hypothesis, but not to be merely obstructionist. We cultivate difference of opinion within the common conversation.

We agreed never to curtail debate, but to strive for the resolution, even if only provisional, of fundamental issues. Holding these poles together has been the central challenge of our life together.

Radically inclusive

The community is radically inclusive. Ours is a conversation that potentially includes everybody interested. Nevertheless, communities are inevitably self-selective: people either want to be a part of a particular conversation or they don't.

The seminar meets around a 'round table.' All Fellows as specialists are equidistant from the center. All Associates are also equidistant from the center; the voice of non-specialists is limited only in the interests of disciplined discourse.

Establish the facts

The seminar also meets around a 'square table.' The table is square in the sense that we attempt to establish the 'facts,' which denote what we agree to be the case, on the basis of the evidence available.

We resolved not to limit the evidence to previously determined sources or facts. We undertook to collect the data afresh, re-classify, and re-interpret. We challenged canonical privilege. We are not trying to salvage or defend orthodoxy, but to discover the 'facts' and follow them wherever they lead. As Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan used to say: Everyone is entitled to his or her opinion, but no one is entitled to his or her facts. We try to honor this distinction in our deliberations.

Public accountability

The Westar seminars have agreed to report to a broad, literate public. Reporting is a part of our dedication to literacy. It is also the way we discipline ourselves to speak and write a common language.

Prepared by Robert W. Funk – May 26, 2004

Revised by Lane C. McGaughy and Char Matejovsky – June 30, 2006