

Holy contention: The freedom to raise questions

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [June 14, 2005](#) issue

It is not clear whether Thomas Reese was forced, pressured or strongly encouraged to resign as editor of the Jesuit weekly *America*. It's widely assumed that his departure was connected to the election of the new pope, Benedict XVI.

Father Reese has been a much sought-after commentator on issues of faith, culture and the church. Though I have never met him, I have always been grateful for his leadership, clarity of thought and courage. *America* is in much the same business as the *Christian Century*: it provides a forum for Christians to discuss important issues in an atmosphere of freedom and dialogue. In the process, *America* published and was criticized for articles that questioned official Roman Catholic teaching on gay marriage, stem cell research and the salvation of non-Christians.

Reporting on the event, the *New York Times* quoted Bernard Prusak, chair of the theology department at Villanova University, who expressed "concerns about the kind of theological dialogue we should have in the church. Catholic theology has to explain what the official teaching is, but it also has the responsibility to probe new data and raise new questions."

"To explain, probe and raise new questions." That's a pretty good description of a journal like this, I think. The underlying assumption is that people need the freedom to explain, probe and raise new questions—for the sake of faith.

On the day I was pondering Father Reese's fate, newspapers reported that a large Catholic organization, the Cardinal Newman Society, had asked Loyola University in Chicago and 18 other Catholic schools to rescind invitations to commencement speakers because of their public opposition to or questioning of some aspect of official Catholic teaching. In addition to Loyola's invited speaker, Leroy Hood, who supports stem cell research, the list includes Hillary Clinton, Rudy Giuliani, Cicely Tyson and Cokie Roberts.

That kind of thinking is not exclusively Roman Catholic. It exists among Protestants, including my Presbyterian family, which makes periodic efforts to pin down precisely what people mean when they affirm the “essential tenets of the Reformed faith.” The purpose of the exercise is not only to state what the church believes with clarity, but also to exclude those who have the temerity to dissent or question.

Our assumption at this magazine is that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, is particularly active when people of faith and integrity contend with one another. This approach is not a “dictatorship of relativism,” as some might think. It is the expression of a fundamental trust in the One who said “I am the truth”—which means that the truth is not in human statements about him or in institutions that claim his name.