

NEWS & OPINIONS

The Politics of (Self) Division

Kevin Birth

Editor's Note: Our country and our culture are deeply divided at this time. Worst of all, we have lined up all the various issues facing us into "liberal" and "conservative" forms, requiring people to pick one side or another and stick to it. Having heard some of the balance that Kevin Birth brings to this matter, I asked him to write reflectively on the situation for Christians who have allowed the culture to divide them just as deeply from one another. Eloise Meneses

Biography: Having determined in high school that I was a mediocre fiddle-player and tobacco chewer, I left Harrisburg, Pennsylvania to pursue anthropology. In graduate school at the University of California at San Diego, I was trained in social and psychological anthropology. In 1989, I began my research on cultural concepts of time, and conducted ethnographic field research in rural Trinidad. In 1993, one of my esteemed professors said, "You know too much about this place, you better leave." Soon after, I left California in my old Mazda with my pregnant wife and new Ph.D. to seek my fortune at Queens College, where I had been hired on the basis of wearing purple pants during my interview.

Since then I've continued to research on time, published several books, and got mixed up in debates about time measurement policies.

There is a dialogue in my head. One voice comes from being a liberal academic teaching at a major university in a large, coastal city. The other voice comes from growing up in central Pennsylvania with rural, conservative friends and being involved in a very conservative Youth for Christ. Every day, these voices get challenged. My liberal friends say things that my Pennsylvanian self finds offensive and obnoxious. My conservative friends say things that my liberal academic self finds ill-informed and myopic. My liberal friends tend to view conservatives as stupid, and selfish. My conservative friends tend to view liberals as immoral and arrogant. In fact, both sets of friends are smart, wise, and moral.

And thus my internal dialogue, waged in hyperbole, takes shape. Here is just one instantiation.

Lib-me: A couple of months ago some unfortunately conservative follower of Trump challenged me by saying "what makes you such an expert on that." I replied, "I published a book on it." I took down another conservative by explaining that my sources were peer-reviewed and not some anonymous meme probably posted by some pig farmer in the Philippines (that's identity of the person associated with QAnon's IP address, please don't make me explain how an IP address can indicate somebody's identity). I then explained what peer review is—it's like being graded by multiple experts. Of course, the person I was explaining this to probably never got higher than a C in high school English.

Oh, if I'm not an expert on something, chances are I know somebody who is. I can say things like "My friend who researches that says. . .," or "my colleague who is one of the world's leading authority on those has concluded . . ."

Yes, I can shame a conservative in front of a liberal audience with the best of them. What I don't understand is why those conservatives keep supporting Trump. In the face of all the facts and arguments that I muster and which they cannot refute, they won't budge.

Conserva-me: What a jerk. I mean, what a colossal, gold-plated, certified jerk. I don't want people like him running the country, and that's probably exactly the sort of person liberal politicians would hire. They'd just make new rules and tell me what I can and cannot do, and what I should and should not think. What makes him so blasted smart? Just because he got himself some advanced degree from one of those liberal, brainwashing colleges doesn't make him smarter. My grandfather never got anything beyond a high school degree and was the smartest and wisest person I know. On Sundays he could quote from every book of the Bible, and during the week he could fix anything. He would know how to take this self-inflated windbag down a notch or two.

Lib-me: What this nation needs is to make people wear masks and take COVID-19 seriously. We need a national mandate. To address climate change,

we need to end people's use of fossil fuels. We need gun control—there is no reason for somebody to have some of those guns. We need to model our healthcare system on socialist European nations to ensure quality healthcare for everyone. Why are these things so hard to understand?

Conserva-me: Make me do this; make me do that; keep me from doing this; take away my guns; and turn me into a socialist. Heck, I bet he doesn't even know which end of the gun is which, much less the difference between a .22 and a shotgun. I know about guns—I don't need some smug city liberal telling me about them. Let me take care of myself—I don't need anybody telling me what is right or wrong other than my family and my pastor. A coastal liberal atheist has no foundation on which to preach to me about morality, anyway. The climate might be changing, but it's not because of my car. It's not like I can walk to the grocery store or work. I can't afford to live in a place where everything is that handy, and I'm not sure I'd want to.

Lib-me: And how can THOSE people be pro-life when they don't support universal healthcare, are pro-gun, and back a president who has done nothing about COVID?

Conserva-me: How can somebody who wants to allow late-term abortions have any morality whatsoever? These liberals just want to have sex without any consequences or responsibilities, and yet they want to tell me about my moral contradictions? Give me a break.

It is easy to see those who hold different views as inferior. As I reflect on my inner voices, I'm struck that my liberal voice is egotistical, and my conservative voice is defensive. I note that the liberal voice argues from a feeling of intellectual superiority, and the conservative from a sense of moral superiority. It strikes me that the two voices talk past each other. Morality and knowledge are pitted against each other. That should not be.

My conservative voice feels that what is at stake in politics is freedom and morality. Trump is the vehicle for defending those principles. He is a flawed vehicle, but he is all my conservative voice has right now. Now that Trump is no longer president, the liberal challenge to freedom and morality remain and the liberal proclivity toward governmental regulations and increased government spending is a threat. The liberal side of me does not view the use of science and knowledge as a threat to freedom and morality, but as a means of achieving both, yet, the liberal in me has to grudgingly admit that the regulations are a shortcut to achieve conformity, and that throwing money at a

problem does not necessarily solve it. I realize that both voices are important—they need to be in dialogue. I also realize that right now there is too little dialogue. The visceral joy of a put down seems to have replaced respectful disagreement.

Many years ago, Bronislaw Malinowski urged anthropologists to learn culture from "the natives' point of view." We cannot do that if we are only preaching our point of view. Another anthropologist, Gregory Bateson, argued that we should never look at processes of change in terms of who has power and who does not, but in terms of how people react to one another. I fear I have lost sight of such anthropological principles. I fear that rather than seeking to understand the point of view of those with whom I differ, that I often relish their disdain and celebrate the differences. Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek," not "blessed are those who hurl the best insult" or "blessed are those who are the aggrandizingly pedantic." When I look at those who hold opposing political views, do I listen, or do I polarize?



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