



**HOW TO FIGHT A CULTURE WAR:
Civil Discourse in an Age of Mean Politics**
The Election Sermon, October 24
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There is an adage, meant to rhyme:

“Ev’ry boy and ev’ry gal
Who’s born into this world alive
Is either a little lib-er-al
or else a little con-serv-a-tive.”

That goes for religion, politics and any other endeavor of importance. And, oh, were that the end of the story. There have been times when their relationship was elevated and respectful, but not always. Today is such a time and the tone is bitter and acrimonious, though the worst in America, perhaps, was the election campaign that made Thomas Jefferson president.

During early elections in the U.S., when communications were slow, word often was put out that one or the other candidate had died, and that voting for a corpse was useless. Jefferson and John Adams were best of friends before the presidential competition that Adams lost, and their love too was lost till their deaths on the same day of the same year; it is interesting too that both were Unitarian, and a third, Abigail, John Adams’ wife, also adored Jefferson and tried to hold the two men together with her love, friendship and famous letters. And lest we forget, Aaron Burr killed Alexander Hamilton in an extreme example of personal and political revenge. And all took place in the world’s premier democracy. Hello to the real world.

Once upon a time there was such a thing as a *philosophy* of politics but it has turned into political *science*. We are children of polls, charts and graphs of voting patterns, and the preferences of certain social groups. We have to wonder why ancient philosophers didn’t use such observation in politics, as they did for religion. They merely lamented that people generally were stupid about who they elected to govern. Plato felt that kings should be philosophers but were one so inclined, the worry was whether he could make up his mind and get much done.

EARLY POLITICS

People in ancient times who did have a voice in electing rulers lived in a Greek city-state, called a *polis* and from whence we get words like “politics” and “political.” But they were tiny cities and their political process is hard to duplicate in modern ones with enormous populations. Their small-scale and completely autonomous societies made it possible for Greeks to have face-to-face discussion and arrive at decisions with majority participation of citizens. Even juries were quite large and the death of Socrates was decided by a vote of hundreds for and hundreds against.

I mention all this because throughout the history of political philosophy it has been believed that it is wiser to build on what others have observed, experienced and thought about how people best live together, that is, *in community, in the collective*. E.g., Aristotle realized that

all philosophers before him were convinced that key to it was the education of youth. If this sounds obvious now, consider that he said this at a time when it was believed the key was how people and things were organized, and he advocated a longer view with more lasting results. Whoever was talking, however, what mattered was what was in the best interests of everybody.

DIONYSIUS AND APOLLO...

And that leads to human nature and how it is expressed in a conflict that can be either constructive or destructive. Today we call it liberalism and conservatism and they come out of the nature of being human. Again, it helps to begin at the beginning. Two of the most popular gods in ancient Greece were Dionysius and Apollo—popular because they represented two kinds of human beings as well as the tension within individuals themselves. Apollo was a god of reason, order and discipline; Dionysius one of ecstasy, disorder and sometimes irrationality. Parents may well see themselves as Apollo and their kids as Dionysius, but all of us know what it is like to need order and still have the need for “a good time,” to let go, to “get out from under” so many responsibilities and enjoy being carefree. We just hope everything will still be “in order” when we return—or come to our senses. “Club Med” and similar outlets have been for “Type A’s” who generally are workaholics and need somewhere and some place to go where details--and their kids--are taken care of while they have a good time.

...LIBERAL AND CONSERVATIVE

Different as they were, both Apollo and Dionysius were solidly rooted in human nature. The result was that they were the two largest statues in the temple at Delphi, testament to the enduring necessities of human nature. And we still think of Apollo as the corporate, organized, orderly, disciplined and militaristic people and Dionysius as spontaneous, artistic, creative, intuitive, inspirational, and even revolutionary types, though both are overdrawn: many people have both to varying degrees. Clearly when people went to war the qualities of Apollo were important. And people typically tended to rely more on institutions, established wisdom and traditions. They believed the world should change slowly and rapid change was viewed with disdain.

Today we don’t use those terms; we use *liberal* and *conservative* to describe our views of the world often through the lenses of politics and religion. Both terms arose about the same time but for different reasons. When 19th-century philosophers began to talk about the rights of the individual, they were called “liberals,” and right on its heels came the term “conservative.” The truth is, before liberals, the world was *conservative*, but that wasn’t the name for it—it was just *the way things were*. Conservatism wasn’t in books because it wasn’t a subject; it was a living thing and was found more in the speeches, tracts and pamphlets of politicians.

Ever since, there is a clear dividing line between those who want change or “reform” and those who resist it. Conservatives resist exotic ideas for fear they will destabilize society, and were suspicious of democracy because of the usefulness over so many centuries of having long-established ruling classes. Even in a democracy, the conservative tradition seeks quickly to

establish precedent, as through constitutional law, where change may be gradual through a careful and lengthy process and thorough debate.

DEMOCRACY AND CONSERVATISM

Important to conservative belief has been that human affairs are extremely complicated and human behavior is unpredictable; governing therefore is a skill of a special kind and not all people have it--it is learned by practice and best managed by rights of succession. Certainly not all conservatives think alike but if there is any position that they could take and cease to be conservative in the deepest sense it is the belief that people are fundamentally good and at last perfectible.

Surely we can see how this describes the difference between liberals and conservatives in religion: the first thing that orthodox, conservative religion must do with an infant is to cleanse it of original sin; even then, a person has no chance of being good or perfect in an ultimate sense. We are believed to be permanently sinful and in no way can we better ourselves—we can only be “saved” by an agent beyond us. Imagine the shock caused by the rise of Unitarianism, which declared that people clearly are not always good or completely perfect, but are *essentially* “good;” that part of us is a divine spark in our frail humanity, and with that divine spark we must *work towards* perfection, however impossible it seems to be. And it is in this striving that *progress* is possible.

LIBERALISM AS NEW

And there is a kind of politics that believes the individual too is important and has value, and that the community can be saved when people save themselves. There is no ruling class: anyone and everyone can stand for office—and in a democracy that comes from ideas of the rights of the individual and the perfectibility of humans; even conservatives accept the loss of a ruling class, making conservatism in a democracy different from elsewhere.

And not even all liberals and all conservatives are the same. Liberals who seek anarchy and personal irresponsibility have their rights of speech and assembly but are unlikely to get my vote. And there is a great difference between a conservative who believes in public service and responsibility towards others, and those who believe that the distribution of wealth should be decided by a free for all and that all have the same chance and opportunity in our system.

So liberalism as we know it is a relatively new idea, and now we have our own powerful conflict that expresses human nature, called *liberal* and *conservative* that is as strong as that of Apollo and Dionysius in ancient times.

THE CULTURE WAR & ARMAGEDDON

This conflict hardly could be sharper than it is today. Last summer I met more of Linda Lu's New England friends, and I must say she's an equal opportunity friend when it comes to politics. Among them is a wonderful and conservative couple. All that went on at the time in the presidential campaign, as you remember, caused immediate and intense feelings and it was important to enter any social situation prepared to keep differences from becoming unpleasant. This happened to be after Sen. Kerry's wife said, "Shove it," to a reporter, and my new friend was livid about it and asked me what I thought of her—as if I would defend her impoliteness. But something else had happened shortly before that and I answered his question with another: "If I were to go before my church board," I asked, "and we had a disagreement, would you advise me to say what Teresa Kerry said to the reporter, or what Vice President Cheney said to a colleague on the Senate floor?" To his credit, my new friend got the point, but had a wonderful comeback: "Either way," he said, "I expect you'd be fired."

PEOPLE WHO DON'T LIKE EACH OTHER

I love that sort of banter, but this political season has been a great test of our civility. And I'm not at all sure it's even about politics. After all, a "culture war" has long been brewing in America, and clearly has erupted, and election day will be an Armageddon of sorts, but it may not solve as much as we hope. We're learning who we really are as a people and certainly are not who we long have assumed we were. We are surprised sometimes at what family and friends really think, feel and want, and it shows in their politics.

And we're finding that America's self-image not only is complicated but clearly changing. Feelings for and against immigrants and homosexuality; the nature of marriage; views of war, terrorism and the military may cause some people to vote for someone they never would have considered before. And these two types of people simply don't like each other. I see less visceral reaction to the two presidential candidates than to their wives, who seem to represent something prejudicial in modern America, including their personal styles and appearance—one with not a hair out of place and the other with none in place—as if that means something profound and perhaps fearful. Why we pick on candidates' families, I don't know, but we subject them to parody and cruelty. If they didn't support their husbands we would think them terrible, but they're not really running for office.

MEDIA AND POLITICS

The media too are a large part of this division, and too much so, in my mind. The so-called *fairness doctrine* for the media does not mean a station or network cannot have a particular political slant; it is whether they provide opportunity for the other viewpoint. Some of them do, and it is disingenuous to say, e.g., that CNN and NPR do not. But those who tell their program guests to "shut up" and take them off the air, clearly are biased and unfair. Do not think I speak only of Bill O'Reilly. Ever since Dan Rather rudely interrupted then-Vice President George Bush the elder and closed the interview, I have refused to watch Rather. Actually I

thought he went too far when he disrespectfully addressed president Nixon many years ago—a disgrace that of course many of my liberal friends loved. Walter Cronkite even said after the Bush treatment that Rather should have been fired. It was no surprise at all to me when he blundered badly on the National Guard matter: his true colors showed and in my opinion his time is up, and he oughta get out of town!

When it comes to religion, I find others more egregious. I remember when conservatives were not particularly religious and when a number of well-known ones were asked to name the most important books of all time, and not one mentioned the Bible. Today virtually all of them do, or else they dare not to, and it began when a president targeted religious conservatives to broaden his party's base. So much irony surrounded that tactic, given that he was not very religious. His references to God as "the man upstairs" did not reflect thoughtful, let alone deep, convictions, and his preference against church-going, citing security reasons, simply did not wash. Actually conservative presidents tend *not* to go to church, but my new friend in Massachusetts might say that maybe they don't need it; only liberals do. Our current president, in reply to an early question said his favorite philosopher was "Christ, because he changed my heart." This must have caused a stir in heaven when Jesus heard he had been busted from savior of the world to a mere philosopher, but there you go.

ORDAINED BY GOD TO RULE

As for the belief that "God" has ordained someone to be president, three years ago I read a book I didn't know Freud had written. It was about Woodrow Wilson, and his belief that God had so chosen him. But at least Wilson was private about it. Freud analyzed all of Wilson's speeches and available correspondence and concluded that while Wilson, in holding this belief, was not psychotic, he clearly was dangerous as a national leader. I agree that is not a stable notion to hold; one is appointed by the people via the electoral process—not by some other agency or obligation, and it *is* dangerous to assume the latter. That's what we held John Kennedy responsible for—to indicate clearly that he would be accountable to the people and not to pope or Church.

SEPARATION OF CHURCH & STATE

For our parts, you and me, as people of faith and especially one that holds high the individual but seeks the well-being of all and justice in society, I expect us to be passionate while assuming that others are not necessarily less intelligent than we; to present ourselves and our convictions well and without disrespect, even when we have been treated so. Be part of the electoral process, work for your chosen candidate and party, but do not flout the law because others tell their faithful it is a sin to vote for a particular candidate, or because some political parties ask for names and addresses of congregation members in order to solicit their votes; or because certain churches distribute voting guides right in the very pews. We should not become lawbreakers because someone else is. I can promise you that I and this congregation have received no requests for information about this congregation and if we did we would not honor

it. My party knows where to find me, yours knows where to find you, and they'll have to find all the rest the hard way, but not through religion, not through this congregation.

As you encounter or engage your friends and members of your communities, avoid saying anything you can't take back. Never go too far; we would only regret having done so. I know that there are people including employers, family and friends who want you to vote as they do. Don't *ever* do that. When two people think alike, chances are one of them isn't thinking, and it shows lack of character. Speak your choice and your conscience while acknowledging the dignity and self-respect of the other person.

And whatever the outcome of Nov. 2 in America, never stop believing in democracy. Among a free people, there is no place more sacred than the voting booth and no act more sacred than casting the ballot. Our country at last is neither Apollonian nor Dionysian, Democrat or Republican: it is ever seeking moderation and unity, not extremism and division; and the people, in time, know which is which.

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