

Biden must find America's religious and political common ground to lead nation

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New administration can pull things together by advancing consensus

Analysis/Opinion:

The level of acrimony on our iPhones and on our streets makes it clear that in the 21st century, political ideology has caught up with religion as one of the "comprehensive doctrines" that captures

the hearts and minds of citizens in powerful and compelling ways.

The Biden administration has an opportunity to pull things together toward the center. The key is finding some common ground among the dominant religious, political, moral conventions and their passionate advocates. He can be a great president if he succeeds.

The inevitable pluralism of "comprehensive doctrines," a term used by moral philosopher John Rawls, poses one of the great challenges to America's liberal democracy. This category includes religions, as well as systematic moral philosophies and political or social ideologies. According to Rawls, a well-ordered democratic society of free and equal citizens cannot be based on any single "comprehensive doctrine," but must be based on a theory of political justice that all citizens affirm.

We might say that a larger than usual number of the adherents of comprehensive doctrines in America are no longer finding common ground in an overlapping consensus. Human history shows this to be a perilous development. Modern liberal democracy emerged only against the backdrop of Christian wars of religion that bloodied European soil after the Reformation.

We've come a long way from the 30 Years War, even though things have looked pretty bleak over the past 10 months or so. The current conflict is not between Catholics and Protestants, nor exactly between fascists and communists, and maybe not between Whites and peoples of color. The divides between and within religions are persistent, but these divides are rooted instead in passionately held political and ideological worldviews and social theories.

Consequently, the current battle is being fought between the major political parties and at their margins. To some extent, both the Democratic and Republican parties have become somewhat like the purveyors of comprehensive doctrines, acting like traditional religions with precepts, moral absolutes, strict rules of enforcement and excommunication. Moreover, they have become centers of money and power.

The parties and their respective ideologies/platforms have dramatically expanded their spheres of influence. For example, media have increasingly shifted from the center, as a place of "objectivity" where

citizens can consume well-researched information. The traditional media have become more like advocacy supporters for one kind of political party's comprehensive doctrine or the other. Even major digital social network platforms (run by the new oligarchs) are shifting in a similar direction. And the corporate sector is also engaged, taking sides in support of one comprehensive doctrine or the other.

It's a problematic situation.

For a stable political society, the citizens who espouse diverse comprehensive doctrines (and most espouse some version of such a doctrine) very much need to be comfortable with the principles of political justice that form the basis of the society. That is, the citizens need to generally affirm core principles such as liberty, equality of opportunity and fair distribution of benefits. They also need to have a general commitment to cooperating with fellow citizens, even with those who espouse alternative comprehensive doctrines, and even when they don't agree with them.

It's quite disturbing that at a time when the tradition of liberal democracy that emerged from Christian/Enlightenment civilization is facing challenges on the left and right, leading to disorder and instability, various strains of Christianity are struggling to find their way through the perils of late modernity, trying to remain relevant through accommodation.

The Biden administration, and the Democrats in general, now with political and even economic and cultural dominance not seen in a long time, have an opportunity to create a larger sphere of overlapping consensus that a large segment of society can affirm. If they cannot, things may degenerate further.

Religious leaders also have a chance to help pull things together. In addition to membership in their religious comprehensive doctrine, they frequently have ownership of a political/ideological comprehensive doctrine. For example, a Methodist can also identify as a progressive Democrat, or an evangelical may stand with Trump Republicans.

Only through coercive power can a state keep the peace when a very large percentage of citizens are either not well-informed, are not very good people (for whatever reason), have lots of resentment and feel alienated from the systems of money and power, or simply are unreasonable and want to impose their comprehensive doctrine on others. That coercive power can be wielded through policing or the legal system, or by imposing economic sanctions or cultural forms of shaming. None of these are happy options.

Hopefully, Democrats will use their power well and wisely. Hopefully, Republicans can regroup well and wisely. And hopefully, Christianity and the various "comprehensive doctrines" that animate the body politic can do the same.

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