

GUEST ESSAY

Is There a Way to Dial Down the Political Hatred?

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By Molly Worthen

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President Biden tends to hammer on the theme of national unity, often in theological terms. On Memorial Day, he described the ongoing battle for the “soul of America,” a conflict between “our worst instincts — which we’ve seen of late — and our better angels. Between ‘Me first’ and ‘We the people.’” In January, in his Inaugural Address, he quoted St. Augustine: “A people was a multitude defined by the common objects of their love.”

That line appears in “The City of God,” in a chapter that laments the fate of a people who drift from heeding their better angels to obeying their inner demons — like denizens of the Roman Empire, which “declined into sanguinary seditions and then to social and civil wars, and so burst asunder or rotted off the bond of concord in which the health of a people consists, history shows,” St. Augustine wrote.

Over the past six months Mr. Biden has been warning us, in his frank and ecumenical way, that Americans have become a bunch of idol worshipers. He’s right. We have transformed political hatreds into a form of idolatry. A team of researchers analyzed a range of survey data and concluded that “out-party hate” now seems to shape American voting decisions more than race or religion do. “The foundational metaphor for political sectarianism is religion,” the researchers wrote in the journal *Science* last fall, based on “the moral correctness and superiority of one’s sect.” Political hatred has become Americans’ animating faith, a chief source of existential meaning.

The analogy between political sectarianism and religious faith goes only so far. I don’t mean to suggest that every crackpot political opinion deserves the status and legal protection of a religious doctrine or that all dogmatic mind-sets are morally equivalent. It should be possible to hold one party responsible for voter suppression and the Capitol riot while recognizing that pseudoreligious ideologies and purity cults have multiplied on both ends of the political spectrum. This is a commentary not just on the polarization of politics but also on the persistence of humans’ metaphysical needs, even in a secular age — and a nudge to reappraise our prophecies of apocalypse or salvation from a humbler perspective.

Every year another survey finds that fewer Americans are going to church for answers about the meaning of life. But sleeping in on Sundays doesn’t satisfy those old spiritual cravings: a hunger for a sense of control over their destinies and reassurance that they’re on the side of good against evil. “The aspiration to fullness can be met by building something into one’s life, some pattern of higher action or some meaning, or it can be met by connecting one’s life up with some greater reality or story,” the Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor wrote in “Sources of the Self.” “It would be a mistake to think that this kind of formulation has disappeared even for unbelievers in our world.”

In the late 1950s, when Gallup asked a random sample of Americans whether they wanted their daughters to marry a Democrat or a Republican, 72 percent either didn’t respond or said they didn’t care. Back then, religious divides seemed to matter far more than party lines: 19 percent of Americans who married before 1960 chose a spouse from a different religious group, according to the Pew Research Center. In recent years, the figures have shifted radically. The same Pew survey found that 39 percent of Americans who wed since 2010 were in an interfaith marriage, and a 2016 survey by Lynn Vavreck, a political scientist at U.C.L.A., found that only 45 percent of Americans didn’t care about the political affiliation of their child’s spouse. I suspect that if researchers asked that question now, after years of hatred and disinformation stoked by the Trump White House, the figure would be much lower.

Today, religious boundaries are far more permeable; it’s interpolitical marriage that presents a violation of sacred community, an offense to core identity. “We are inherently social animals, and we need that sense of belonging and attachment. We have emotional needs that we can’t provide for in isolation,” Míriam Juan-Torres González, a senior researcher at More in Common, an organization that studies polarization, told me. “A lot of people are getting that recognition they need from fellow men and women in political groups. There’s the politicization of absolutely everything.”

Perhaps it's not surprising that some organizations devoted to dialogue between religious faiths have turned their attention to political divides. Eboo Patel, the founding director of Interfaith Youth Core, has spent the past few years getting to know more conservative evangelicals at Christian colleges. "A big part of what I did after 2016 was to seek to build relationships with nonracist conservatives, people two inches right of center, at places like Berea College and Calvin College," he told me. (Dr. Patel is an Ismaili Muslim, and his organization is ecumenical.) "Let's build a big America tent. That's been the vision."

Last year, Dr. Patel's group tested this vision by supporting a program called Bridging the Gap at Oberlin College in Ohio and Spring Arbor University, a Christian liberal arts school in Michigan. After students from both schools spent a week learning listening skills — and realizing that deep listening is not as easy as it seems — the Oberlin students traveled to Spring Arbor, and then the whole group spent a final week together at Oberlin. They lived, ate and did small-group activities together, sharing perspectives on contentious topics like abortion and the role of the American military.

The program culminated with a "deep dive into the criminal justice system — we met corrections officers, visited prisons and went to the Michigan State Capitol," Alexis Lewis, who graduated from Spring Arbor this spring and participated in the program, told me. She said that the discussions "could sometimes get uncomfortable" but that she was surprised by the honesty and mutual understanding participants expressed. "I think we dehumanize each other when we have different opinions, but in Bridging the Gap we started with telling our stories, and that made you care about the other person," she said. "It wasn't about trying to change someone's views but realizing that the truth you have might not be the whole truth."

I'm convinced (well, I'm trying to convince myself) that most Americans are like Ms. Lewis. They are tired of the culture wars; they want to understand and get along with people different from themselves. It's true that a zealous few turn political ideas into inerrant dogmas because they seek the sense of community once offered by traditional religion and because they crave ideological surrogates for the doctrines of original sin, predestination and divine justice — that perverse blend of control and victimhood that tempts humans when the prospect of taking real responsibility becomes too frightening.

But a much larger proportion of Americans want their sense of free will back. They belong to what More in Common, the organization I mentioned earlier, calls "the exhausted majority." The consistent theme in my conversations with young religious believers on the left and the right is their yearning for the freedom to escape political tribes. Their refusal to be bound by the habits and fears of their parents' generation echoes the special role that young Americans played in the détente between Catholics and Protestants two generations ago — and maybe the history of interfaith conflict has something to teach us about rebuilding working relationships between Republicans and Democrats.

When today's hatreds seem ineradicable, it's heartening to remember how far Americans have come since, say, 1960, when John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign prompted evangelical Protestants to organize a media blitz warning voters that a Catholic president would be a pawn of the Vatican, that fecund Catholic families were taking over the country and that patriotic Protestants shouldn't let charges of anti-Catholic bigotry keep them from sounding the alarm. "Are we moving into an era of Roman Catholic domination in America?" Harold Ockenga, a prominent evangelical pastor, asked in a rousing speech several weeks before the election. "Will there be a denial of rights, freedom and privileges for non-Roman Catholics?"

Although a casual anti-Catholic prejudice persists in some circles today, many Americans greeted the Catholic faith of our 46th president with a collective shrug. Over the decades, a complex series of socioeconomic, cultural and ideological shifts smoothed the way for Protestants and Catholics to recognize one another as fellow humans capable of cooperating in the democratic process and even merging their families. Young lay believers contributed at least as much to interfaith understanding as bishops and theologians did. Protestants and Catholics funded by the G.I. Bill sat next to each other in college classrooms after World War II; they marched side by side in the civil rights movement; they worshiped together in the charismatic renewal movement of the 1960s and 1970s, when Pentecostal-style revivals swept all Christian denominations and made a special impact on college campuses.

It's crucial to see that young Catholics and Protestants were not merely emissaries of inevitable generational change. In the interfaith friendships they made, the spouses they chose despite their "ethnic" last names — in the innumerable small, compassionate interactions that distinguish a thriving civilization from a crumbling one — they made deliberate decisions to reject the prejudices and assumptions of older generations.

"I think a lot has changed with my peers," Aberdeen Livingstone, a rising junior at the King's College, a Christian liberal arts school in New York City, told me. "There's this rise in wanting to be engaged politically but also a rising awareness of the dangers of tribalism. A lot of my friends are trying to get back to something that defines their values other than politics."

She cited the example of anti-abortion activism. "Pro-life issues are a big deal for me, but people my age are starting to see that it's a lot more than abortion. There are so many other areas of life we need to be concerned about: immigration, end-of-life issues, how we're treating refugees and the socioeconomic factors that lead to people considering abortion. What are we doing to alleviate those? We see there's a broader range of ways to help than the legal approach of the Republican Party, what the older generation sees." A growing movement of young Christians are calling themselves "exvangelical" and openly challenging their parents' orthodoxies.

The goal is simply, as Mr. Biden said at his inauguration, to “stop the shouting and lower the temperature” — and get into the habit of questioning our own gods now and then. Catholic and Protestant concord became possible as believers learned to take one another’s ideas seriously without papering over real disagreements. Sometimes our political enemies are, indeed, uninformed, hopeless bigots. But often they are confused and scared mortals grasping for a faith.

We can diagnose our political crisis in the language of instincts and evolutionary psychology or the theological terms of depravity and idolatry or all of the above. We need all the tools for self-scrutiny — and hope — that we can get our hands on. “I say diversity is not just the differences you like, and the history of interfaith cooperation has a set of excellent lessons for this,” Dr. Patel, the interfaith leader, said.

He cautioned against letting all the gloomy pronouncements about prehistoric instincts and sectarian tendencies dictate Americans’ political destiny. “Human beings were made to be moderate. We are naturally moderate. That is from the Quran: God made you to be a people in the middle. You can’t be on the extreme for a long period,” he said. “I think there is a deep exhaustion in finding an enemy everywhere and turning everything into a fight.”

Humans may be wired to need some kind of faith, but we are not fated to be fanatics.

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