

George Soros, Tim Keller and the Spiritual Core Fueling Political Hate

A new spate of new bombs mailed to the Clintons, the Obamas, and George Soros—and multiple acts of violence or vandalism directed against Republicans and conservatives—confirm what we already know: Creeping tribalism has Americans bitterly divided, acrimonious, even hateful toward each other based on political differences. Behind this animosity lies a spiritual principle that Rev. Timothy Keller touched on during his address at this year's Acton Institute annual dinner.

Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, offered his insights in a lecture he titled "Identity, Business and the Christian Gospel"—but its lessons go to the heart of every human being.

Who am I?

The problem, Keller said, is that people chose a "modern identity" by defining themselves completely with one, selected characteristic or feeling. Often, it is a profession, especially high-status careers like medicine, law, or entertainment. But this artificial self-image generates multiple inner ailments.

First, "if something becomes your identity, you don't have any limits. You're addicted to it," Keller told the sell-out crowd at Grand Rapids' JW Marriott on Oct. 17. "You go beyond where you should. You work beyond the limits that are going to hurt your body, that's going to hurt your family."

Secondly, "You have to have validation from outside"—constantly.

A third “sign that you’ve turned business or your profession into a modern identity is that the inability to critique yourself,” he said. He cited an article by writer Benjamin Nugent, who admitted that when he “made the quality of my work the measure of my worth,” he “lost the ability ... to see what was actually on the page rather than what I wanted to see or what I feared to see.”

“I tried to make writing my only god,” Nugent confessed in *The New York Times*, and it led to “depravity, the old Calvinist definition thereof: a warping of the spirit.”

What does this have to do with political hatred—on social media or in the streets of Portland and Charlottesville?

Let’s assume that someone bases a modern identity, not on a profession, but on his or her political views. Holding certain perspectives on the issues makes him feel like a virtuous person who is fighting to establish justice and bend social developments toward “the right side of history.”

This is no mere speculation. A new report titled “The Hidden Tribes of America” found, “Perhaps the most important aspect of the hidden architecture underlying political behavior is people’s group identities.” (Emphases in original.) While one could quibble about much of the report, no one can doubt that overcommitment to these ideological identities is setting society against itself.

Political bias overtakes racial bias?

Researchers have found people across the West show greater bias against those with different political views than against members of other ethnic or racial groups. Shanto Iyengar and Sean Westwood found that, by 2014, “hostile feelings for the opposing party are ingrained or automatic in voters’ minds.”

Their experiment found that racial bias exists. (Both blacks and whites showed a slight preference for the black

candidate.) But 80 percent of people would select a member of their own political party, even against more qualified applicants.

“Partisans discriminate against opposing partisans,” they wrote, “and do so to a degree that exceeds discrimination based on race.” Westwood worried this would cost young Americans real-life jobs or college scholarships. But soon, he learned the problem was worse than he realized.

A 2017 study by the same researchers confirmed the same problem dominated the U.S., U.K., Belgium and Spain. The problem is deepening by the day. And the stakes are higher than jobs or scholarships.

NBC News interviewed Dartmouth professor Mark Bray during the height of the antifa clashes, which he pronounced ethically justified. Antifa activists had to crush anyone expressing repugnant but otherwise constitutionally protected views “before you get to the point where there are tanks and airplanes,” he explained. “I wouldn’t characterize my political perspective as being ‘violent protests’ so much as community self-defense.” (Of course, “violent protests” is not a political perspective, since it lacks any intellectual substance.)

Over the last year, extremists have reversed the 1964 Civil Rights law by chasing minorities out of public accommodations. Public figures who do not share the demonstrators’ commitment to the forced redistribution of wealth find themselves targeted by menacing protests that threaten to spill over into physical violence. And now, physical violence has broken out.

It sounds as though the extreme partisans “don’t have any limits” in affirming their identity.

The mythology of modern identity transforms the rioter into a knight of the realm or the vanguard of “social justice.” Without the belief that the government nears either a Fourth

Reich or racial dystopia, it would be impossible to see protesters on either side as anything other than equally violent advocates of discredited totalitarian ideologies—who are promoting their secularist delusions by means that break the norms of civilized society.

Feelings Trump Morality

Christian moral standards deny the psychological need for “validation from outside,” and so they must be rejected—along with those who believe in them. The Becket Fund (which was also represented at Acton’s annual dinner) explained, by its very existence, “Religious believers and dissenters are regarded by totalitarian regimes as a particular threat to state authority and security, because religious believers appeal to an authority higher than the state.” This explains why, as Alexander Solzhenitsyn said, “hatred of God is the principle driving force” of Marxism. “Militant atheism is not merely incidental or marginal to Communist policy; it is not a side effect, but the central pivot.”

Within the context of modern U.S. culture, R.J. Snell writes at Public Discourse, “If there is one thing that the prophets of egalitarian ideology cannot abide, and increasingly hope to squelch, it is the true and sincere believer in normativity—the person who judges that we are, each and every one of us, obliged to exercise our freedom in keeping with a higher law.”

Acknowledging a higher power, and the moral norms that Jesus reveals, would force people who believe that the ends justify the means to engage in a searching inner critique that may churn up things they “feared to see.” A divine perspective teaches us that different economic outcomes often stem from different personalities and life choices. It shows that vesting greater power in governments led by fallen human beings leads to tragedy. It underlines the common humanity of our opponents. And it insists upon the standards of dialogue

and conduct demanded by the Prince of Peace.

Keller asked, “Is there a solution” to the problems created by modern identity? “Yes,” he said. “It’s the Christian gospel.”
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A slightly different version of this article originally appeared at the Acton Institute’s Religion & Liberty Transatlantic website and is reprinted with permission.

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