

Common Values?

A Commentary for KUFM

June 24, 2009

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If liberals and conservatives truly have the best interests of the country at heart, they would do well to review new research on morality by social psychologist Jonathan Haidt. He identified five moral foundations for a good society and how conservatives and liberals value them differently. Such research could provide a basis for overcoming differences and fostering social progress. Unfortunately, purely political interests currently undercut such hope.

Haidt concludes that five values are written on the human moral mind at birth: care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity. Haidt's research further shows that liberals distinctly value the first two—care and fairness—more highly than conservatives—who value loyalty, authority, and purity much more highly than liberals. In fact, many liberals often don't view these latter values as part of morality at all.

Nevertheless, Haidt argues, all of these moral foundations are necessary for a good society. Loyalty and authority provide cohesion and order. Purity is comprised of rules for what we do with and put into our bodies—most often defined in terms of sex and food. Religious communities have long relied on developing the distinction between the pure and the impure as a way to define what makes a person a virtuous member of that community.

The contribution liberals bring to conservatives lies not in rejection of these conservative values, but in their concern for how they are applied—when, for example, loyalty becomes rejection of the immigrant; authority becomes the Patriot Act; and purity becomes discrimination against gays and lesbians. In fact, many of the great religious and moral leaders in history—such as Jesus and the Buddha—challenged the oppressive application of these values within the traditions of their day, without rejecting them outright.

One of the most common arguments that conservatives make regarding liberals is that liberals reject moral foundations altogether. But this criticism misses how fairness is a fundamental moral value in itself. Fairness seeks ways in which diverse groups can live together, rather than allowing one group dominance over another. The contribution of conservatives lies in the effort to define what unifies us, but the value of liberals lies in the protection of those who do not seem to fit the mold.

The liberal emphasis on care often manifests itself in a recognition that some aspects of human well-being cannot be met individually but must be met by the society acting together through the government. Conservatives worry that such an emphasis results in too much governmental control. Both concerns seem necessary.

We're living in a time of tremendous change. That, in itself, is appealing to liberals, who thrive on new experience, but is threatening to conservatives. President Obama himself embodies change as few other presidents have. The trick is to overcome the fear of change to seize an opportunity to find new ways for liberals and conservatives to work together.

Unfortunately, as conservatives struggle to find their identity, their leaders have appealed to their values in ways that undermine rather than support constructive cooperation with liberals. Prior to the election, Republicans consistently portrayed Obama's race, name, and background in ways that suggested that he is not a loyal member of our American group. Now, the emerging strategy is to play on fears of how Obama is a European-style socialist.

At best, such critics become marginalized in new efforts to build society. At worst, as columnist Frank Rich worries, some critics subtly enable fringe extremists that may resort to anything to stop a President whom they see as hostile to their ideas of American loyalty, authority, and purity.

The great hope of Obama's election was how he represents a capacity to bridge differences. His success came from speaking to moderates, recognizing other values, and using strategies that bring people together. Conservative New York Times columnist David Brooks has argued that Republicans would do well again to become the party of community and civic order. Instead, he says, they talk more about the market than about society, and more about income than quality of life. Tax cuts, rather than social good, become the end in itself.

But if Haidt's research is on target, then a party of community and civic order has a great deal to talk about with liberals, and that requires a much greater recognition of the values of the other side than either liberals or conservatives typically display—especially politicians.

American citizens, therefore, are best served by seeing divisive political tactics for what they are—often contrary to the common good. Overcoming polarization will not be led by politicians appealing to their political bases and demonizing their opponents. Progress on the issues that divide us will require us to be better than that, building relationships rather than stressing divisions, and recognizing that our opponents represent important values as well. This is our task. Change is inevitable and necessary. The opportunity for positive change is simply too important to waste.

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