

The Troubled Moral Middle

One lesson we are learning from the last election is that “moral values” are a decisive reason why some people voted the way they did. While it is useful to have a public conversation about values, such discussion is susceptible to two problems. We have to solve them both if we are to have any hope of becoming more united as a society.

The first problem is limiting the definition of the values terrain to issues that are primarily about personal choice, like gay marriage and abortion. Values are also central to health care access, tax burden distribution, and environmental stewardship. It is a troubling development if we lose the power of values like social justice as we squabble over personal morality. Whether we sacrifice private wealth to ensure health care for the uninsured, or to save our children from future tax increases to pay off the debt, says as much about our national moral character as our positions on gays and guns.

The second and more vexing problem is that we have lost political leadership in the moral middle. Our values debate is taking place within a highly polarized political environment in which values are equated with the policy positions of the extremes. Finding common ground and mutual understanding has come to reflect political weakness. Rallying the political base and dividing with fear and name-calling are more likely strategies for attaining power.

Most Americans, however, occupy what may be called “the troubled middle” on difficult moral issues. While the troubled middle is a tough place to be, it reflects recognition of overlapping values and greater understanding of those with differing views. Such positions are troubled because they recognize that many of the issues that divide us most obviously are those that involve true dilemmas—that is, they involve tragic trade-offs in which both good and bad are realized in any decision. Furthermore, the troubled middle is a reflection of the sheer ethical complexity of issues like stem cell research, gun violence, and responding to terrorism. It is impossible to know the ethical black and white on such issues without the godlike wisdom that none of us has.

Unfortunately, however, some people think they do. If we are to have any hope for unity in this society, we have to find a way to reclaim the moral middle. Imagine the unity we could achieve as a country if we worked toward measures that would make abortion increasingly rare, while still allowing some choice. We could work to make guns safer without depriving people of ownership rights. We could guarantee civil rights for gays, even if we don’t yet agree on marriage. We could use less troubling means of obtaining stem cells for medical research without banning them altogether.

One might object that setting aside the extremes for the middle is moral compromise, rather than standing on principle. But in fact, we *can* compromise without abandoning principle. What we’re doing is recognizing the validity of other principles and the integrity of the people who hold them. We’re exercising the moral humility that is the first virtue of being ethical. Most of all, we’re recognizing that in a pluralistic society, our role as citizens or political leaders is to ask ourselves what policies best

promote the common good, not our individual self-interest or personal religious doctrine. Protestantism and Catholicism have long taught that one's public role and private morality may require different things of us. And both of them warn of the twin dangers of pride and claiming divine authority for our moral judgments.

Once we work together in the moral middle, we will likely discover that the world didn't end, and that we have not only better politics but also a better society. From there we can then see where more acceptable solutions may lie down the road. We can also realize that our political opponents don't have horns growing out of their heads. Democrats have faith and values too. Republicans can be tolerant as well.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to our working in the middle is fear. We not only fear terrorists half-way around the world, we now seem to fear the neighbor half-way down the block, or on the other side of the political isle. It is both incredible and sad to hear the expressions of genuine fear that almost half the country feels at the election of our president. It may be justified, but I hope not, and it doesn't have to be.

I, for one, am not afraid. If the current national leadership succumbs to the hubris of single-party dominance in Washington, they will ultimately fall. History teaches that lesson without exception. But those who are on the other side should not be so afraid that they enhance polarization and are deterred from the moral middle. For that is where most people are, and the ground is ready for those with the courage to take it.

This is Mark Hanson of the Practical Ethics Center at the University of Montana