

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
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Metaphors for America's Cultural Divide: "Hamilton" and the University

The 2016 presidential campaign just does not seem to end. The cultural divide that this campaign accentuated keeps raising its ugly head. Although the voting data now becoming available does not permit quite this simplicity, the national media often painted the recent election as a binary one: rich vs. poor, rural vs. urban, white vs. people of color, and the male working class vs. everyone else. Despite what many evangelicals argued, this election was about far more than abortion, same-sex marriage or transgender bathrooms. This election was about the changing identity of America as a Republic founded on the principles of equality, virtue and community (see the first few paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence). In this Postmodern, Post-Christian era, we struggle to define these precious terms so central to this Republic. We have no anchor, so as a culture we lash out at one another across the cultural/political divide. There is simply no agreement on what constitutes the foundation of this Republic.

In this *Perspective*, permit me to cite two examples of this utter cultural confusion about the nature of this Republic and then conclude with a most personal reflection.

- First, consider the recent planned outburst of the cast of the hit Broadway musical "Hamilton." Vice President-elect Michael Pence, along with members of his family, attended a recent performance of the musical and at the end of the performance, as he was leaving, Brandon Victor Dixon, who plays Aaron Burr in the production, read this statement: "You know, we have a guest in the audience this evening—Vice President-elect Pence, I see you walking out but I hope you hear just a few more moments. Sir, I hope you will hear us out. We, sir, we are the diverse America who are alarmed and anxious that your new administration will not protect us, our planet, our children, our parents, or defend us and uphold our inalienable rights, sir. But we truly hope this show has inspired you to uphold our American values and work on behalf of all of us. All of us." At one important level, such a speech was a direct breach of theater protocol. Rarely do stage actors directly address a member of the audience. It was further an "act of theater" that evidences no respect or acceptance of decorum. Indeed, Steven Van Zandt, a bandmate of Bruce Springsteen's, wrote on Twitter: "You don't single out an audience member and embarrass him from the stage. A terrible precedent to set." Yet, such a "speech" also is what this Republic is all about—freedom of speech; the freedom to express oneself, even in such an aberrant manner. With some confidence, we can conclude that this development at the recent "Hamilton" performance was a metaphor for the struggle between the values and virtues dear to the heart of the multicultural left and the values and virtues dear to the heart of working-class white voters and

conservative Republicans who voted for Trump. The multicultural left was lecturing the conservative right about the values and virtues of this Republic. America is a multicultural, pluralistic, diverse culture and the Democratic Party has identified itself with these elements as the protector and defender of blacks, Hispanics, LGBT advocates and Muslim immigrants. In crafting itself in this manner, the Democratic Party has completely alienated the working class, male white citizens and, in many cases, their families.

- A second illustration of the cultural divide is occurring on America's college campuses. Columnist George Will biting comments on a situation at Yale University the day after the election: "The morning after the election, normal people rose—some elated, some despondent—and went off to actual work. But at Yale University, that incubator of late-adolescent infants, a professor responded to 'heartfelt notes' from students 'in shock' by making that day's exam optional . . . The compound of childishness and condescension radiating from campuses is a reminder to normal Americans of the decay of protected classes—in this case, tenured faculty and cosseted students." The uniqueness of our Republic is discovered only from a study of history. So, how are the colleges and universities of America teaching this needed dose of history? Will cites a recent American Council of Trustees and Alumni study ("No US History? How College History Departments Leave the United States out of the Major"), which found that "the overwhelming majority of America's prestigious institutions do not require even the students who take a major in history to take a single course on United States history or government." Often "microhistories" are offered to history majors at schools that require these majors to take no US history course: "Modern Addiction: Cigarette Smoking in the 20th Century" (Swarthmore College); "Lawn Boy Meets Valley Girl" (Bowdoin College); "Witchcraft Possession" (University of Pennsylvania). At some schools that require history majors to take at least one US history course, the requirement can be fulfilled with courses like "Mad Men and Mad Women" (Middlebury College); "Hip-Hop, Politics and Youth Culture in America" (University of Connecticut); and "Jews in American Entertainment" (University of Texas at Austin). Will concludes that "Institutions of supposedly higher education are awash with hysteria, authoritarianism, obscurantism, philistinism and charlatany. Which must have something to do with the tone and substance of the presidential election, which took the nation's temperature."

It is the church of Jesus Christ that should be of some help here. The church has the message that this divided seemingly hopeless culture so desperately needs. But where is the church?

There are many righteous leaders in our local churches that are providing hope centered in Jesus in the middle of this mess. But many evangelical Christian leaders did not advance the message of hope that Jesus offers. Instead, in the words of columnist Michael Gerson (a self-confessed evangelical who speaks openly of his faith): "The most enthusiastic Trump evangelicals . . . in this political season acted more like an interest group seeking protection and favor than a voice of conscience. They blessed an agenda that targeted minorities and

refugees. They employed apocalyptic rhetoric as a get-out-the-vote technique. And they hitched the reputation of their religious tradition to a skittish horse near a precipice . . . [; and] they have endorsed the politics of anger.”

This is serious business for evangelical Christians in the age of Trump for, quite frankly, Christianity relativizes politics. Gerson writes: “If Christianity is true, C.S. Lewis noted, then ‘the individual person will outlive the universe.’ All our anger and worry about politics should not blind us to the priority and value of the human beings placed in our lives, whatever their background or beliefs.” Politics and the Gospel have little to do with one another.

Finally, the Christian message is one of hope—not in politics but in our Savior who died for us and who promised to return for us. In so non-critically embracing the politics of Donald Trump, many in the church sent the message that character does not matter; righteousness does not matter; ethics and personal morality do not matter. What then does matter? A pragmatic, end-justifies-the-means ethic trumps all other issues so central to a Christian worldview.

In short, many in the evangelical church of America are not part of the solution but part of the problem. The church has the message to bridge the cultural divide, to heal this deeply divided nation. But in some cases, we have lost the credibility and with that the opportunity to represent Jesus Christ as that solution. We are perceived simply as just one part of the cultural divide—the political Right!

See Patrick Healy “‘Hamilton’ Cast’s Appeal to Pence. . .” in the *New York Times* (19 November 2016); Philip Rucker “Trump and Pence vs. ‘Hamilton’ Cast,” in the *Washington Post* (19 November 2016); George Will in the *Washington Post* (18 November 2016); and Michael Gerson in the *Washington Post* (21 November 2016).