

Cornel West, Robert George keep fighting for tolerance

Terry Mattingly

August 3, 2020

America is so divided that 50% of “strong liberals” say they would fire business executives who donate money to re-elect President Donald Trump.

Then again, 36% of “strong conservatives” would fire executives who donate to Democrat Joe Biden’s campaign.

This venom has side effects. Thus, 62% of Americans say they fear discussing their political beliefs with others, according to a national poll by the Cato Institute and the global research firm YouGov. A third of those polled thought their convictions could cost them their jobs.

That’s the context for the efforts of Cornel West of Harvard University and Princeton’s Robert George to defend tolerant, constructive debates in the public square. West is a Black Baptist liberal and George is a white Catholic conservative.

“We need the honesty and courage not to compromise our beliefs or go silent on them out of a desire to be accepted or out of fear of being ostracized, excluded or canceled,” they wrote in a recent Boston Globe commentary. “We need the honesty and courage to recognize and acknowledge that there are reasonable people of good will who do not share even some of our deepest, most cherished beliefs. ... We need the honesty and courage to treat decent and honest people with whom we disagree — even on the most consequential questions — as partners in truth-seeking and fellow citizens ... not as enemies to be destroyed. And we must always respect and protect their human rights and civil liberties.”

They closed with an appeal to Trump and Biden, reminding them that “victories can be pyrrhic, destroying the very thing for which the combatants struggle. When that thing is our precious American experiment in ordered liberty and republican democracy, its destruction would be a tragedy beyond all human powers of reckoning.”

It's distressing that this essay didn't inspire debates on social media and in the embattled opinion pages of American newspapers, noted Elizabeth Scalia, editor at large of Word on Fire, a Catholic apologetics ministry. After all, West and George are influential thinkers with clout inside the D.C. Beltway and they spoke out during a hurricane of anger and violence — literal and verbal — in American life.

“Apparently, a statement that is not about drawing blood or scoring points for a particular ‘side’ is not interesting enough — or perhaps just not ‘clickable’ enough — to be given the attention it deserves,” wrote Scalia, who is known as “The anchoress” online. West and George have been friends for 13 years, dating back to team-teaching Princeton classes covering “great texts” ranging from Plato to St. Augustine, and from John Stewart Mill to Martin Luther King Jr. The bottom line, for both, is that personal integrity matters more than political tribalism and ideology.

“All the pressures are on us to become part of a team, to become part of a tribe, never to criticize our own side, always to go along,” said George during an appearance with West at Baylor University near the end of 2019. “This can be on the right or it can be on the left, it doesn't make a bit of difference. You have the same thing across the political spectrum. Cornel is on the progressive side. I am on the conservative side. We have both had exactly the same experience of being alienated ... because in conscience we can't go along with this or that or the other thing.”

Both men stressed that honest, even blunt, civil discourse is possible if participants truly listen to people on the other side and are committed to seeking truth — not just power. It's possible to move forward as colleagues, even while disagreeing on life-defining issues.

West said it's sad that, during his travels with George, many people are shocked that they are friends at the level of Christian faith and family life.

“We know that deep, genuine friendships are never reducible to agreement on public policy,” said West. Then again, “one of the things we agree on at a very deep level is how you keep alive the Socratic legacy of Athens and the prophetic legacy of Jerusalem. That's spiritual, that's existential, that's political.”

Civility is essential, but it will not be enough, said West.

“We want respect,” he said. “You've got to learn how to respect each other, in our deep disagreements.”