

In a Fragmented Age, Spotlighting the Core of What Unites Us



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By **Peter Berkowitz** - November 30, 2014

It is a commonplace belief that contemporary life's dizzying pace of change and its rapid multiplication of choices have fragmented American culture. The conflict between religion and secularism is only the most longstanding and obvious division.

The revolution in transportation has played a big part in fragmenting our culture: The blessings of increased mobility have shrunk roots to place and weakened bonds to family, friends, and fellow citizens. The revolution in communications has had a major impact: At any given moment cable TV and satellite radio broadcast thousands of programs; the Internet hosts hundreds of millions of websites; and social networking generates countless self-referential feedback loops. And the ordinary operation of free markets continues to generate perpetual churn and cyclic dislocations. All told, the constant overturning of routine and undermining of authority give rise to proliferating communities and sub-communities increasingly locked into their own partial points of view.

One cost of fragmentation is the obscuring of the core conviction that links Americans. Our founding belief is that all men and women are created equal by virtue of being endowed with the same inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Neglecting this conviction magnifies fragmentation.

Cultural fragmentation gives rise to disparate reactions. The left tends to celebrate the liberation from inherited orthodoxies. The right typically deplores the decay of shared values.

At the same time, both see in the fragmentation of our culture a cause of the polarization of politics. And both indulge the comforting delusion that permanently winning over a critical mass of voters is basically a matter of more effective campaign messaging.

A better understanding of how we are united by the conviction that human beings are by nature free and equal would encourage greater respect for the divisions that are bound to continue to animate our politics.

One achievement of Larry Siedentop's "Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism" is to bring into focus an unexpected but decisive source of our core principles. An emeritus fellow of Keble College, Oxford, Siedentop is a distinguished student of the history of European political thought. He brings to his new book special expertise in

the great 19th century French thinker Alexis de Tocqueville, who argued that "equality of conditions" was the defining feature of the modern era and that the vibrancy and stability of democracy in America owe much to the vitality of religion in America.

At once scholarly and readable, "Inventing the Individual," in effect, takes these Tocquevillian arguments as its point of departure. Siedentop will find little opposition to his assertion that Western civilization is marked by liberalism -- that is, the politics of individual freedom and human equality.

But in sharp opposition to conventional wisdom, Siedentop denies that Western liberalism arose in the 15th century with the Renaissance's throwing off of the shackles of the Middle Ages and its recovery of classical Greek and Roman thought. Nor does he think that the 17th century social contract theories of Hobbes and Locke ushered in the era of the individual. Nor, despite the Enlightenment's pretensions to have finally and fully liberated the human mind, does he credit 18th century European thought with establishing that political life must respect the equal worth of every person.

Although each of these represented watershed moments, Siedentop maintains that organized religion -- the very force from which the Renaissance, social contract theory, and especially the Enlightenment presumed to liberate humanity -- placed the individual front and center and made him the fundamental unit of political life. It was Christianity, according to Siedentop, that introduced the idea of the moral equality of individuals. And it was this faith that revolutionized social and political life in the West and continues to provide the foundation of liberal democracy in America and around the world.

Antiquity, and not only in the West, was characterized by natural inequality. The family served as "the basic unit of social reality." It was led by the father and functioned as religious cult that worshiped ancestors. The social order was fixed. Women were subordinate. Duty beyond the extended family of clan and caste and tribe was difficult to conceive.

Ancient cities were formed by the joining together of several tribes. They operated as "a confederation of cults" in which civil magistrates and priests were originally one and the same and citizenship was restricted to those who shared in the worship of its gods. Ancient liberty involved citizens' privilege and duty to participate in government. The ancient city did not recognize the individual as a separate moral entity. It had no notion of rights, gave no room for personal conscience or choice, and regarded slavery as natural. Particularly in the Greek world, reason was thought to disclose the immutable hierarchy in which "some were born to command and others to obey."

Christianity, Siedentop contends, turned all this upside down. Beginning with its earliest and most influential writings about the life of Jesus -- those of Saul of Tarsus, who became St. Paul -- Christianity inaugurated the era of equality. For Christianity, God is "potentially present in every believer," Siedentop writes. Therefore, salvation did not depend on social

station. Christianity derived the brotherhood, or moral equality of all humanity, from the fatherhood of God. By teaching believers to see in others the holiness that they were taught to see in themselves, Christianity nurtured the reciprocity on which free societies rest.

Christian beliefs slowly acquired expression in practices and associations. The rise of martyrs standing against the Roman Empire dramatized "the exercise of an individual will, founded on conscience." Early Christianity blunted the view of women as subordinate by insisting on "the equal obligations imposed by the bond of marriage." The church, which was open to all but which reached out especially to the poor, democratized social relations. The development of monasticism in the fourth and fifth centuries embodied "the equality of souls in search of salvation" in a form of self-governing social life.

Christian theology also enlarged and refined the sphere of the individual. Through reflection on the will -- that complex of feelings, dispositions, and intentions that determines or fails to determine action -- St. Augustine (354-430) further undermined the claims of moral and political hierarchies. By building on Paul's teaching that God should be sought within, through introspection and self-examination, Augustine encouraged the development of the idea of individual moral agency. He also brought to the fore the struggling, doubting, divided self who would eventually become a hero of liberal modernity.

In the Dark Ages and in medieval Europe, Siedentop shows, Christian belief continued to promote freedom and equality. To deal with doctrinal disputes, the church fostered "the habit of disputation." Charlemagne, in the quest to establish a Christian empire grounded in individual conscience, demanded in 792 that all men -- slave as well as free -- swear an oath of allegiance. Inspired by the idea of a "God-given human status imposing limits on the exercise of power," the church and canon lawyers elaborated the notion of a fundamental law and affirmed natural rights. The church revolutionized politics by asserting its jurisdiction over individuals rather than groups, even in secular affairs. Paradoxically, by declaring independence from kings and nobles and exclusive authority over religious matters, the church helped to formalize a separate secular sphere devoted to securing peace and property; it thereby prepared the ground for liberal democracy's all-important institutionalization of the separation of church and state.

Siedentop's gracefully told intellectual history is not without flaws. Sometimes he conflates the remarkable writings of Plato and Aristotle and the beliefs and practices of the ancient city, as if classical political philosophy encoded the temper of the times. He pays too little attention to the Hebrew Scriptures, whose beautiful teaching in Genesis 1:27 that God created man in His image, "male and female created He them," is the deepest biblical root of human equality. And he might have drawn attention to thinkers in our era such as Leo Strauss and Charles Taylor who, from different angles, have illuminated freedom's dependence on religion.

Nonetheless, rarely does a scholarly work furnish so sobering and sustaining a lesson for public life: Despite the fragmentation of our culture and the polarization of our politics, we are united by a conviction of equality in freedom that transcends the enduring division between religion and secularism, and derives strength from both.

Peter Berkowitz is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His writings are posted at www.PeterBerkowitz.com and you can follow him on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.