

The Journal of Values-Based Leadership

Volume 12
Issue 1 *Winter/Spring 2019*

Article 2

January 2019

Guest Editorial: Ethnic, Ethos, Ethnicity, Ethnocentrism

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Recommended Citation

Hester, Joseph P. (2019) "Guest Editorial: Ethnic, Ethos, Ethnicity, Ethnocentrism," *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22543/0733.121.1253>

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl/vol12/iss1/2>

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Ethnic, Ethos, Ethnicity, Ethnocentrism

by Joseph P. Hester
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There is an underlying current of insecurity pervading American life today. It reveals itself in prejudice and hatred, incivility and indecency. The Trump administration is not as dumb as they seem to be as they have exploited this undercurrent effectively. What happened to us between Jimmy Carter and Barack Obama to cause this? Perhaps we need to go back to the 1960s and the Civil Rights and Feminist movements to find an answer.

First, let's take a look at the four words mentioned above:

- Ethnic is an adjective meaning “relating to a population subgroup (within a larger or dominant national or cultural group) with a common national or cultural tradition.”
- Ethos refers to the characteristic spirit of a culture, era, or community as manifested in its beliefs and aspirations; its character or the character of a people.
- Ethnicity is the fact of belonging to a social group that has a common national or cultural tradition.
- Ethnocentrism is an evaluation of other cultures according to preconceptions originating in the standards and customs of one's own culture.

So, highly underestimated by many were those who disagreed with the civil rights and feminist movements. Their beliefs and aspirations were ignored – politically – and they sat there seething. This was a diverse group made up of many subgroups, from Southern Evangelicals to neo-Nazis. Their diversity was wide-ranging but they had one thing in common that Trump has exploited – they felt they had been pushed aside and left out of the political equation and the many social changes going on in the United States.

It was easy to use this for a political advantage, dividing America into “loyalists” and demonizing any who would disagree. The right-wing of the Republican Party became the “in-group” sharing an identity and interest in making “America Great Again” or when translated, “making America into their own image again,” a pre-1960's image.

The failure of those who would disagree is – I think – they didn't understand what was going on around them. They should have noticed because the reaction to Obama had a negative and racist foundation. Trump covered this with the “birther” controversy, but he was fooling everyone.

In 1975 Don Killian and I wrote an article entitled “The So-called Ethnocentric Fallacy” in which I explored what happens when we define “morals” and “morality” in an exclusive and limited way. I saw what was happening early on, but being a philosopher, could only write about it and use my understanding in my teaching of ethics.

In a new article that will be published in 2019 entitled “Morality Without Borders, a View of Humanity as Community,” I continue this theme. Here are my opening words:

Identity politics is on the rise, and not only in America, but in Europe and South America as well. It is a nationalism, unbridled and unchecked, unleashing an exclusive ethic into society appealing, not to an expansive moral ought, but one that is narrow and provincial, condemning and vilifying. The fact of national diversity, and the imprint of dissimilar values orientations, often causes fear and insecurity among those groups and sub-groups who perceive their values under attack. Being ethnocentric and tribal seems natural to many as there is in all of us a desire to protect and project our most cherished values on others. Values are what define us; they are the substance of whom we are and reveal our commitments and beliefs and their assumed superiority. But our values can also limit our moral acuity narrowing our moral focus and diminishing its energy, unseeking of the commonalities that bind humanity to humanity.

An inclusive and greater moral ought is needed for advancing a vision of a moral world greater than ourselves – a morality without borders. This we call “a moral human ecology” and is supportive of a vision of “humanity as community.” This is a moral vision setting the boundary stone for a global human moral ecology as this article will show. How often we write in abstractions and generalities forgetting the people about whom we talk. Their needs and the inhumanity heaped upon them many seldom notice. There is some distance between us and others, but with empathy and care, and a vision of the “greater,” this gap can be closed. Given the present-day discombobulation of value, especially moral value, “morality without borders” is a guiding metaphor which beckons our attention. “Humanity as Community” cannot be over-emphasized and accentuated. Its possibilities are endless as it can become a beacon of hope in a divided world.

Joseph P Hester is an independent scholar and regular contributor to the *JVBL*. His extended biography is provided, *infra*, after his article “Values-Based Leadership in a Time of Values Confusion.”

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