What the Rancorous First Presidential Debate
Says About Us . . . .

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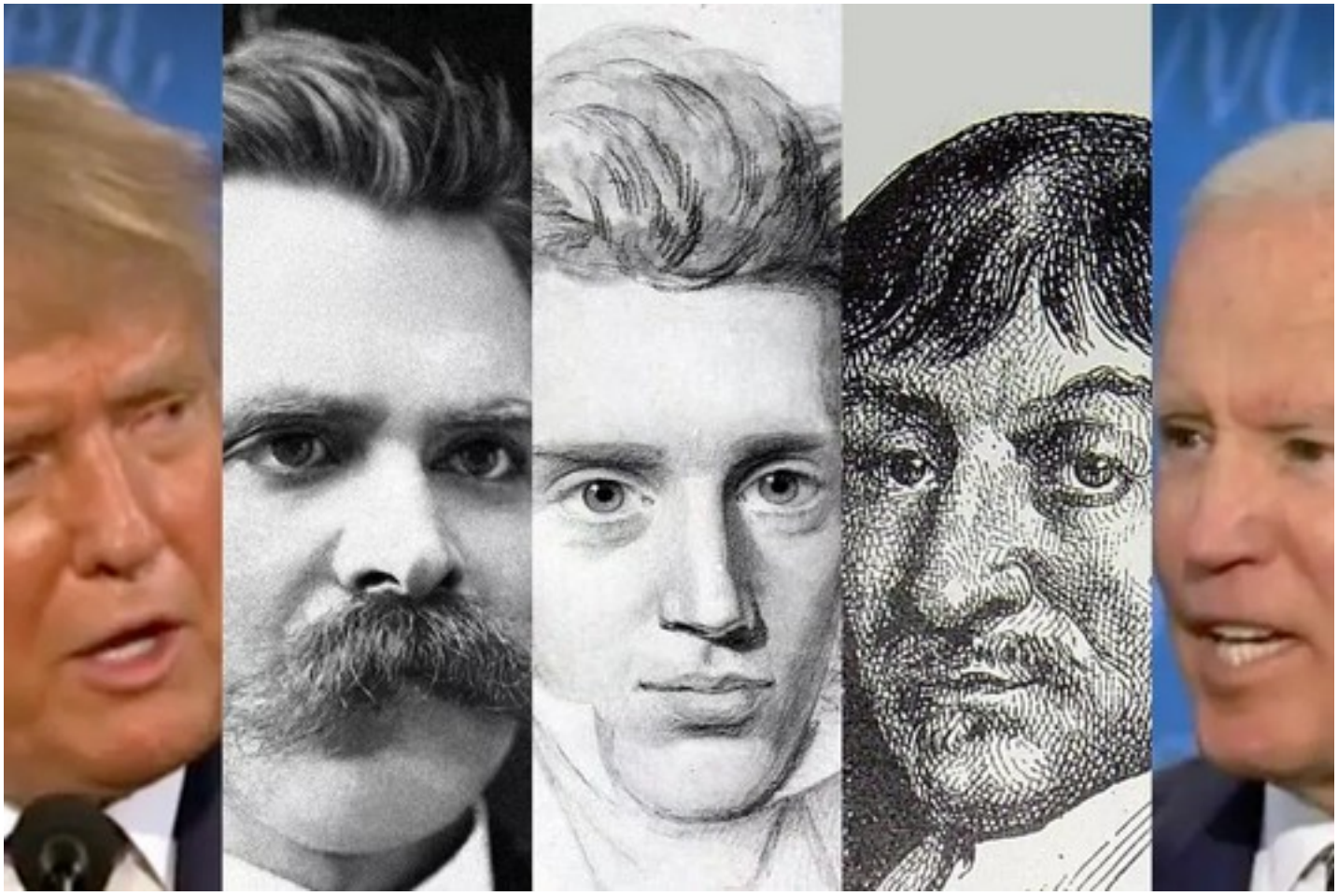

From Left to Right: (1) President Donald **Trump**; (2) Friedrich **Nietzsche**, expositor of nihilism; (3) existentialist philosopher Søren
Kierkegaard
; (4) rationalistic philosopher René
Descartes
; (5) former Vice President Joe
Biden
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The recent presidential debate and the discussion in its wake reflect a disturbing trend. While this trend has been growing for decades, the increase in severity has picked up steam in our overheated culture. It is easy to put all the blame on the candidates and the moderator, but we must recognize that they reflect us.

America is at a boiling point. Two divergent views of what the country has been, and should be, have caused nearly everything to be politicized. Until recently, sports were one of the few things that Americans of all political persuasions and backgrounds could enjoy watching and rooting for together. Now that has been poisoned as well.

The Church, too, is more divided than ever, and politics drives much of it. So many people seem more passionate about their politics than their faith, and if a teaching of the Church contradicts a position of their political party, guess which one takes precedence? Weaponized ambiguity from our leaders and a refusal to deal with dissent hasn't helped. Dissent brings controversy and controversy brings heated divisions.

How have we gotten to such a divided and hostile moment in our culture and in the Church? I would argue that it is an ugly blend of nihilism and existentialism. It is the "**tyranny of relativism**" that Pope Benedict XVI warned us of.

Nihilism holds that that there is no significance, purpose or intrinsic meaning to anything. It is a form of extreme pessimism and a radical skepticism that it is possible for anything to be known. As a result, we should believe in nothing; we should have no loyalties, no faith, and no purpose in life. It is most often associated with Friedrich Nietzsche, who identified it more so than invented it or proposed it. He predicted that destructive effects would eventually destroy all moral, religious and metaphysical convictions and precipitate the greatest crisis in human history. We may well be approaching this point.

Existentialism includes a multitude of ideas, but it is most widely known for its notion that there is no intrinsic meaning to anything other than what we ascribe to it. Meaning is not discovered — it is imposed. Nature and the world around us have no purpose, no reason for existing. There is a fundamental absence of reason and the impossibility of getting any real understanding of reality. The world about us has, ultimately, nothing to say to us.

Both philosophies have deeply infected modern thinking. The introduction of a deep meaninglessness to all things proposed by nihilism is answered by an imposition of meaning by existentialism. The individual will supplants reason and we bestow on ourselves the power to define meaning rather than discover it.

Realism

Reality used to be something we went outside of ourselves to discover. We studied it, learned its purposes and discovered its meaning. This is the foundation of the scientific method. Reality is not just “there.” It reveals order, purpose, laws and the nature of things. We learned to work with, and in, the rational world around us. From this we also deduced what should be done and what should be avoided. Even before the book of Scripture there was the book of Creation, which is a revelation to us of what is and points to the Designer who made its intricate systems.

Since the rise of nominalism in the 14th century and the dubiousness of Descartes in the 17th century we have pulled up our roots from reality and are increasingly living in our minds. We have become more and more dismissive of the idea that reality has any intrinsic meaning. Nihilism and existentialism are the fruits of these earlier trends. As a result, male and female, or marriage and sex, or right and wrong, are human constructs that we can change at will.

This explains a lot about the confusion and conflict in our modern setting. Fundamentally, human will has supplanted reason. Meaning and reality are now about my power and your power to say what it is.

But how can we live together in a world where reality itself is a matter of personal definition, where each individual simply imposes a meaning to things and does not use reason to discover

it? The simple answer is that we cannot — at least not peacefully.

The tyranny of relativism

This is what Pope Benedict meant by the “tyranny of relativism.” The source of truth has moved from the object to the subject. If every individual can say what is true rather than discover what is true, we end up with relativism and its unreasonable notion that conflicting claims can both be “true.” This denies the principle of non-contradiction. Everything is relative and subjective, leading to the statement one hears frequently today: “That may be true for you, but it isn’t true for me.”

These notions all marched in under **the banner of tolerance and open-mindedness.** The problem is that when your relativism clashes with my relativism, tolerance goes out the window and a power struggle ensues. The one who prevails is the one with the most power, the most resources, or the best access — or it is simply the one who yells the loudest.

With power comes intimidation, the force of newly imposed laws, and the marginalizing and criminalizing of opponents. All the while these tyrants congratulate themselves for their open-minded tolerance while assailing their opponent as intolerant bigots, haters who want to impose their values on others. It is the tyranny of relativism.

This brings us back to the first presidential debate. Interrupting, talking over others and yelling are all par for the course just about everywhere today. Social media wars have spilled over into our streets, where anger and violence are increasingly common. The news programs are rife with shouting, interrupting and verbal attacks. Yet it was these same commentators who expressed the most shock at the tone of the debate. Much of this hostility is an attempt to control the discussion. It is about power, not reason.

Nihilism and existentialism — along with their offshoots, relativism and subjectivism — have made it almost impossible for us to have a civil argument, let alone a thoughtful conversation. If we can’t even agree on what is male and what is female, or that abortion kills a human being, or

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The first presidential debate was a lamentable shouting fest. Even more sad, though, is that it reflects what our culture has become. Increasingly, conversation and debate have been replaced by dueling monologues. Reasoning with others has been replaced by attempts to use raw power to compel others by law or force. In both the Church and the wider culture, a fierce tribalism has set up in which different sides barely speak to one another. They live in separate worlds and emerge only to engage in power struggles to win the day.

We can shake our heads at what we witnessed at the debate, but what we really should do is bow our heads in shame and humility, and pray for the healing of what our "culture" has become.

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