

Racism, Rhetoric, and Charlie Kirk: A Reality We Can't Ignore

Rev. Graylan Scott Hagler says Kirk's death reminds us that violence dressed as debate and politics has always been a threat.
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There are so many words and cliches condemning the killing of Charles James Kirk, and none of the refrains are unique.

"We need to dial back our discourse", "we need to be tolerant of different opinions," and "there is no room in American politics for political violence."

Are people blind to the realities that have been swirling all around us? The language has been violent. The discord has been great. There has been a consistent invitation to dine at the table of heated racist discussion posing as legitimate political speech.

The killing of Charlie Kirk fits within this arena of speech that is racist and hate-filled, but is designed to pose as rational and logical political speech.

In his rhetoric and so-called debate style this 31-year-old evangelical firebrand of the right has stated that Black pilots were incompetent, [Gays should be stoned](#), ironically he was [opposed to gun control, abortion, LGBTQ rights](#), criticized the [Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Martin Luther King Jr.](#), promoted Christian nationalism, advanced COVID-19 misinformation, made false claims of electoral fraud in 2020, and was a proponent of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory.

Born in Chicago's northwest suburbs, Kirk infused politics with racial innuendo and rhetorically violated the safety and security of Black people and other people of color, and the LGBTQIA community. He perverted the history of race and racism in America, attempted to legitimize the nation as a white bastion of civilization and Christianity, and, in general, perfected the use of racial and hateful language — molding it into a form of acceptable and legitimate political debate and viewpoint.

I have stood over many coffins of people I did not agree with and said words of comfort to the families during my 40-plus years of ministry.

But the legitimate debate aspect was far from legitimate historical benign speech, nor was it nonviolent in character. In fact, it touched all of the refrains of the vile language of the past that resulted far too many times in lynchings and other forms of racial violence and upheaval.

Don't get me wrong, I am sorry for the death and killing of Charlie Kirk. I have stood over many coffins of people I did not agree with and said words of comfort to the families during my 40-plus years of ministry. In doing so, I have looked at a person's life to find something to say about their character, worthiness, and contributions they have made in their lifetime. Sometimes the task is easier than at other times.

As I look at the life of Kirk, he was a husband, a father, and what else I do not know. He had friends, I am sure. He played a significant role in his connection with his community that was personal and also collective.

But the problem I would have in affirming this life at an end-of-life ceremony is that he evidently did not care in his living about the security and comfort of others. He did not show empathy. Whether he believed what he espoused, or it was simply a marketing ploy for influence and money, I don't know, and no one will ever know for sure. But Charlie Kirk expanded hatred, marketed the vile speech of old racism in new wineskins, and further jeopardized the lives and security of others.

The right wing is working hard to make a political martyr of him. The President has ordered flags to be flown at half-mast ahead of any remembrance of 9-11. Donald Trump talked about lowering the temperature of the political language that is used, but in the next breath criticized "the radical left" for castigating the hate language of Kirk.

If we are going to be truthful in this moment, the hate that Kirk put out came back on him, and the violent political language that continues to fly in this country will continue to manifest itself in ways where we will continually be praying for victims and their families.

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