Loving your digital neighbour

New media and reconciliation in an age of incivility

Elizabeth Oldfield

Elizabeth Oldfield is Theos' Director. She appears regularly in the media and is a regular conference speaker. Before joining Theos she worked for BBC TV and radio.

Despite public perceptions that religion causes violence and division, Christianity has a long history of peace building. As well it should; the word reconcile means 'to bring together again', and reconciliation between God and his creation is the end of the mission of Christ; first on the cross, and finally at the end of the world. Formal and informal Christian peace-building initiatives, such as CHIPS (the Christian International Peace Service), have been quietly serving across conflicts all over the world. Christian peace-building principles were foundational to the civil rights movement in the USA, and in the aftermath of apartheid. They are still needed in conflict zones today, but attention to less dramatic battles, conflicts and divisions being played out daily in our public conversations is limited.

At Theos, we see our ability to engage across difference and to equip Christians to do this better as central to our role. We are in an age where connecting with those who are different from ourselves presents serious challenges. It has become a truism to bemoan the parlous state of public debate. A search for 'the death of civility' returns 150,000 results on Google. It is difficult to provide hard data for a trend as things change so rapidly and social media itself is so recent, but most people's experience is of public conversations, particularly online, that are angrier, more hostile and more peppered with insults and generalisations.

Earlier this year the CEO of Twitter announced it would take action to help make our public conversations healthier. Jack Dorsey admitted that the platform was hosting toxic engagement in 'increasingly divisive echo chambers'. Our Trump and Brexit saturated discourse has been dubbed the 'age of outrage'.

This applies no less to debates about religion. Although the particular animosity of the new atheist movement has passed, public debate about religion still often erupts into fractious conflict about faith schools, abortion or 'gay cake cases'. Those with no appetite for these often stay in their respective filter bubbles and do not engage with people who believe, behave and belong differently from themselves.

Sadly, sometimes Christians can be tempted to be part of the problem, not the solution. In a world that feels unstable, in which Christian faith is increasingly alien to the mainstream, it is understandable that many of us enter public debate already feeling fearful and defensive. However, Christians should be leading on bridging these divides – just as they often have in conflict zones – seeking to communicate beyond our echo chambers in ways that are not divisive, toxic or outraged but marked by faith, hope and love. This work must be both for its own sake – because we are called to love and serve even our enemies, not just those who we disagree with – and also because in the immortal words of Netflix series *Queer Eye*: 'you can't antagonise and evangelise at the same time.'

How, practically, then do we do it? In my work as a leader of a Christian think tank I spend a lot of time engaging both in person and on social media with

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1. J Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012).

2. JD Green, *Moral Tribes: Emotion, reason, and the gap between us and them* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2013).

3. William Barclay, *New Testament Words* (London: SCM, 1964), pp. 20–1.

4. Henri Nowen, 'Living in the House of Love' in J Dear (ed.), *The Road to Peace* (New York: Orbis, 1998), p. 63.

atheists, secularists and others who do not share my beliefs. I am currently exploring how we build bridges across differences of belief through Theos' new podcast, The Sacred, which features a range of interviews with people in public life about what they believe and why, and what they find difficult and helpful in the ways that Christians engage in public debates.

This experience has taught me that peace building requires first a better, fuller understanding of human beings and how we deal with difference, and second, some habits and disciplines.

What humans are like?

We are less rational than we think we are (all of us)

I live in the world of ideas. My background is in factual programme making at the BBC, including on *The Moral Maze*, and I now run a religion think tank. Facts and arguments, graphs and theories are the official currency of academia, journalism, policy and politics – and by extension, our public debates, at least at the elite end. It is an economy in which we are taught that evidence wins and logic reigns.

Except it does not.

Everywhere I engage with big, neuralgic issues – whether they are our national identity, how we distribute resources, immigration, rights and obligations at the beginning and end of life, race, gender, or anything else painful – I come across a disconnect between how human beings really are and how we are trying to engage.

Part of the problem is that the most prevalent, if implicit, model for why we believe what we believe and how we change our minds is outdated. Rational Actor Theory underpinned much economic and social thought in the twentieth century. This model painted a picture of human beings as rational self-optimising individuals making broadly utilitarian choices to maximise their pleasure and minimise their pain. Homo Economicus, as people in this model are sometimes called, presented with better evidence and clear arguments, would make better and different choices. Rational Actor Theory was never intended to be anything but a helpful economic model, but the dominance of market logic means it has filtered into a broader sense of idealistic individualism. It is a very attractive picture of ourselves – coolheaded, reasonable, enlightened and clear-sighted. Not swayed by peer pressure or beholden to irrational emotions, but charting our own course. Unfortunately, it is also almost completely false.

The academic consensus now offers a very different picture. Jonathan Haidt has written about the rational brain as like a rider on an elephant, thinking it is in control but, in fact, providing justifications for where the emotional mind already wanted to go.[1] Our feelings of disgust, fear, anger, pride or attraction engage faster, deeper and more enduringly in our decision making than the rational reasons of which we are consciously aware.

We are more tribal than we think we are

In his book, *Moral Tribes*, Harvard professor Joshua Green unpacks why we are fundamentally social creatures – interdependent persons, not independent individuals.[2] We long to belong and so we often become 'us and them' creatures, wired to detect and defend against difference. Study

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after study shows that evidence and arguments coming from people who feel like 'one of us' will be filtered and understood entirely differently from the same evidence and arguments presented by someone who feels like 'one of them'. We are all, to a greater or lesser extent, ego driven, scanning the world like Narcissus' pool for glimpses of our own reflection.

Worryingly for Theos' work, at least one study shows that the more highly educated you are the more skilled you are at bending the evidence to match your pre-existing supposition. Those of us educated to university level tend to think we are the best at changing our minds based on evidence but we may in fact be the worst; we are all biased and behavioural psychology adds daily to the list of the cognitive biases that hinder our ability to make purely rational decisions.

We are suckers for a story, and mainly on autopilot

Any PR person will tell you that we are also narratively driven creatures – motivated much more by story than by data. Neuroscience is also exploring just how automatic and habitual we are – making big and small decisions and judgements based on past experiences to save on cognitive capacity.

And God knows this

None of this will sound new to those interested in theological anthropology. Religious understandings of what human beings are like have never really been close to Homo Economicus. The Christian tradition in particular takes seriously human beings' capacity for self-delusion, self-aggrandisement and self-righteousness and calls it sin, or the flesh. Our tendency for tribalism is perhaps a post-lapsarian shadow of something created for our good. We are connected, community craving people because humans are made in the image of a trinitarian God. A longing for belonging is no bad thing, but the Bible is adamant about the dangers of drawing too sharp a line around insiders and outsiders. From the Abrahamic covenant which promises blessing and redemption for all people, to the requirements

in the law for aliens and strangers to be treated equally, to the New Testament covenant which overcomes divides between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, God challenges our tribalism.

Christianity teaches radical scepticism towards ourselves, and values truth arrived at in community and through story alongside individual human reason. If we can keep in mind this radically different anthropology and use it as an opportunity for self-reflection, we might find we

the adventure of moving outside our Christian bubbles and learning how to love and listen to those who think the gospel is irrelevant

can engage with the 'other' more productively. What is clear is that our current tendency to shout statistics and, failing that, insults across the chasm of our tribal allegiances is unlikely to get us anywhere. It is particularly corrosive for Christians to allow themselves to become defensive, shrill and antagonistic in public towards those with whom we may not feel a natural affinity. One of the disciplines we practice at Theos is becoming more aware of our 'political allergies'– the kinds of people that deep down we think probably are not worth bothering with. When this becomes conscious rather than unconscious we are better able to challenge it. Yes, secularist campaign groups can be irritating. Yes, 'spiritual but not religious' types might make you want to roll your eyes. These people might not consciously be your enemies, but they are certainly people it would be worthwhile intentionally learning how to engage with and love.

All of this takes concentration. At Theos we are developing a framework of how we do such Christian peace building within British culture, especially online. So what does that look like practically?

How to engage

Recognise and manage your own emotions and those of others

Peace building requires enormous internal discipline. Becoming defensive, fearful and angry is a very natural and human reaction to people who challenge the things we hold most sacred. I am more and more convinced that our bodies react to intellectual threats to our sense of self or our tribe in a very similar way they do to physical danger. When faced with a threat, our bodies release cortisol – a reaction commonly known as 'fight or flight'. When faced with people who disagree with us, our reactions often map onto those two options – withdrawing from the conflict and surrounding ourselves with like-minded people to avoid encountering difference or lashing out with insults. Cortisol inhibits the ability of the brain to process information rationally and makes everyone look like the enemy. It takes an enormous amount of self-control to recognise that threat response, and to acknowledge that self-righteous anger is attractive because it feels safer than fear and anxiety in an unstable world. Letting that first stress response wear off before trying to process information or attempting to respond helps a lot.

Recognising this fight or flight reaction also helps me have patience with others. Quite often, without knowing much about me, my very presence as a Christian can provoke a threat reaction in people. Perhaps they have painful history with the Church. Perhaps they are gay and assume I will be hostile to them. Perhaps the very concept of God feels undermining to their individual autonomy.

I had a recent altercation with a respected atheist novelist and journalist on Twitter. We had met in person briefly, so I was surprised when and he attacked me online in a very personal way. He accused me of being naïve, dishonest and a bit thick for being a public Christian. I reacted, like most of us would with anger and pain. My immediate temptation was to respond from that place – refuting his points, proving him wrong with my arguments and data, matching his contempt with my own. Instead, by the grace of God I managed to log out of Twitter and ask my husband to change my password. It took four days for me to calm down sufficiently and pray for him regularly enough that I felt able to respond from a place, if not of love, at least of peace. I engaged with him politely and empathetically and we are now building a friendship. Peace is possible if we take seriously God's command to 'turn the other cheek', love our enemies and pray for those who attack and belittle us. In 1 Corinthians 13.7 Paul writes, 'Love bears all things … hopes all things, endures all things.' If we are to follow the one who 'made no threats' when he suffered, we should at least be able to endure the odd insult or inflammatory remark, remembering that the one who is on the attack is loved by God.

Perhaps always, but especially now, the world is full of people driven by pride and fear. As someone who has had to confront my own pride and fear (and very much continues to have to do so) I try and pray for grace for those also in the struggle.

We often hear in churches that love is not a feeling but an action. William Barclay's explanation of the Greek word *agape* really helped me understand this more deeply: '*Agape* has to do with the mind, it is not an emotional experience but a deliberative principle … A conquest and achievement of the will … The power to love the unlovable'.[3] Reconciliation and relationship building with those

who believe differently from us and may in fact be hostile towards us requires this kind of love, patience, concentration and prayer.

Connect before you correct

This is actually an adage from parenting books. Apparently, there is an old youth worker version that goes 'people won't care what you know until they know that you care'. When you express contempt, derision or proud ignorance of people who disagree with you, you are demonstrating that you do not really want to persuade them. You are simply playing to your base and making yourself feel better. Much of what passes for public engagement is in actual fact shoring up our existing tribal identities rather than trying to solve problems.

On the other hand, if you begin with empathy and seek to build trust, you can have constructive conversations with people from tribes very different to your own.

Either way, when people get angry with me for my beliefs, it helps to remember the emotional firestorm going on inside and give it time to wear off without reacting defensively. I try and acknowledge their anger and pain and it can be a simple as 'I can see how that is painful for you', or 'I'm sorry you feel so angry about this.' Swiftly and fully admitting Christianity and Christians have been unhelpful or at fault is also key. Being heard and acknowledged is a powerful human need and a way of showing love, as well as a useful tool for moving, into a more productive place.

Be present (incarnate)

Research shows that many people do not regularly engage with those different from themselves.

Our digital lives make it easier and easier to consume only content and voices we already agree with. Most Christians know the temptations of participating in church activities and church communities to the detriment of relationships with those outside. Cross-cultural mission theory has long spoken of the importance of identification and incarnation. Taking the model of Christ, who while we were yet far off came to dwell among us, it is obvious that those seeking to minister to other cultures must live and work among them and spend significant time with them. This principle follows just as much as we seek to build relationships across differences of belief in a fractious UK culture. Theos' key audience are cultural influencers who are not Christians. We talk about our desire to be 'in their natural habitat, talking their language'. Building friendships with those different from ourselves again requires us to be out of our comfort zone and the social ease of our own tribe. It requires courage and intentionality, persistence and hospitality but we have found it to be enormously stimulating and rewarding.

Subtle, intentional Christian peace building across difference has perhaps never been more needed in our culture. It requires much of us, but as always with the things God calls us to, gives more. The adventure of moving outside our Christian bubbles and learning how to love and listen to those who think the gospel is irrelevant to their lives has become one of the most formative aspects of my discipleship. We still have a lot to learn and many more mistakes to make, but I am inspired by Henri Nouwen's vision of Christian peacemakers as those 'who discover that all people are God's people and belong to the house of love.'[4]