

Review: 'I Find That Offensive'

Here's an example of constructive polemic that goes where angels fear to tread. Left-wing libertarian, Claire Fox, critiques "Generation Snowflake" – the millennial generation, now in their young adulthood, who are readily caricatured by their insistence on things like safe-spaces and trigger-warnings, who have a propensity to take offence and call for silencing, de-platforming, and any number of other sanctions against those with whom they disagree. Throughout this book, aptly named 'I Find That Offensive', Fox recounts various occurrences of such intolerance-in-the-name-of-tolerance that have embroiled and disparaged even champions of progressivism such as Germaine Greer.



Fox's perilous journey through these issues walks a fine line. Despite her leftward and presumably progressive leanings, she sometimes feels only half a step away from derisive Trumpism. For the sake of fairness, then, it's worth noting that she also has a message for the "anti-Snowflakes", exhorting them to respond without just being "the un-PC rebel lashing out" or turning things into a "joking matter" (page 165). And despite her pessimism, she does provide some thoughts on possible responses that are positive and at least somewhat remedial even if fundamentally lacking.

The value of Fox's book is her main point of enquiry. This comes after her first part where she describes the phenomenon at hand, recounting episode after episode in which free speech has been curtailed by official sanction, the fear of the politically correct landmine (page 9), the arrogant epistemology in which the offended person alone can "determine

what your words really mean" (page 9), and the perplexing apparatus of "unconscious microaggressions" (page 20). She then begins to examine generational psychology, particularly of victimhood as the currency of rhetorical authority (page 24), that can be appropriated by overzealous empathy (page 30) or claims of self-identity (page 37), and which frames mere disagreement as abusive violence. It's at this point she asks the key question: Why?

Why does this Generation exist like this? What has brought about these symptoms? From what root do these deeply-held assumptions about society, community, and humanity come from? From my own perspective as a cultural observer, these are the gems to reveal. And Fox is clear:

...why do the young – historically associated with risk-taking, experimentation, rule-breaking and pushing boundaries – now see safety as a trump-all virtue, so much so that concerns about safety are regularly deployed to censor, ban and retreat from argument?... why do so many teenagers and young adults , who as a generation have always been those who aspired to freedom from adult supervision and who regularly rebelled against authority diktat, now demand to live in a hermetically sealed, risk-free cocoon, protected from harm by authority figures who they complain do not police their 'homes' stringently enough?

The short answer is: we socialised them that way. They have been reared on stories about how vulnerable and in need of protection they are. Adult society has fed them a diet of anxieties and provided the language of safety and risk aversion that now threatens liberal values of tolerance and resilience. We are reaping what we have sown – and the young Snowflake Generation, so quick to shout offence, are merely ventriloquising our own fears imposed on them as children. (Pages 66-67)

We are to blame! That's worth unpacking.

At this point Fox appears to step across the line into simplistic tirade. She blames our focus on "health and safety madness" (page 67), public health scares (page 78), child protection systems (page 83), and the "anti-bullying bandwagon" (page 91). Her points are mostly well-made – particularly with regard to helicopter parenting and the consequent diminishment of a generation's resilience. And her critiques of more sacred cows, such as anti-bullying and safeguarding are not without their validity. Nevertheless, her analysis comes across as dismissal with only a cursory glance at the *necessary* place of some of these cultural developments. Speaking from experience of necessary safeguarding in the church, there's an obligation for commentators to be an apologist as well as a critic of measures that are proper defenses against the harming of children.

Her analysis retains its value though. She begins with the symptoms, attempting to reveal the layers on which they rest.

She uncovers two hallmarks of Western Society that I have discovered in my own area of a Christian engagement with contemporary society. These hallmarks are **fear** and **consumerism**.

For Fox the **fear** derives from parental anxiety and the "catastrophising of life's challenges" (page 70). A generation has interiorised an attitude in which "children are portrayed as vulnerable and helpless victims, rather than in any way resilient or competent – or indeed happy" (Page 74, quoting David Buckingham). This is certainly apparent in church culture, in which parents' fears about the world or their own perceived incompetence motivates both an outsourcing of their children's spiritual care, and an infatuation with that which is passive and safe. A very recent article in the Telegraph, "*Parents fear that their religion will make their children outcasts*" illustrates exactly this.

The **consumerism** factor leads to a sense of entitlement. The culture of protectionism and super-vigilance by authority figures has led to a passivity.

However, a lack of awareness of this passivity can mean that young people themselves are flattered at such third-party interest. They seem to enjoy being mollycoddled, gaining an artificial sense of empowerment from their various victim roles as well as feeling legitimised as objects of institutional concern and interventions. Hence we have two seemingly contradictory phenomena: generational fragility combined with narcissistic self-belief in one's own importance. (Page 116)

This also is prevalent in church culture, which has been forced like other institutions into a "service-consumer" dynamic (page 123). Ministry is expected to merely entertain and stimulate, and key aspects of discipleship – self-examination, self-sacrifice, the cost of moral living, etc. – are anathema.

I end up sympathising, then, with Fox's final exhortation to this current younger generation to not given into the "condescension" of mouthing "the identity-laden values that PC Baby Boomers and academic cultural relativists have been pushing at you for years" (page 150) and so "toughen up" (age 162) and grasp a more "vibrant sense of autonomy" (page 175) that can transcend the prevailing zeitgeist. And her appeal to embrace a "new model of personhood, a new philosophy of freedom" (page 173) that seeks an "aspirational future" that "replaces safety as the end goal" (page 174) is almost on the money.

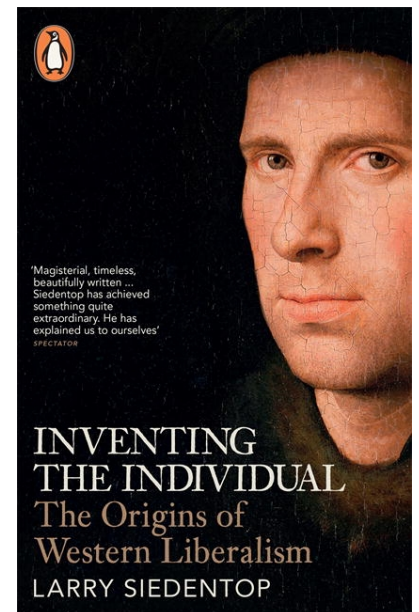
What I think is missing is something that can be encapsulated by the Christian sense of *hope*. Such hope is realistic about the threats of the world, yet a source of great assurance. It encapsulates an objective sense of value that places

opposition outside of oneself (and therefore able to be not taken personally). It also provides a sense of purpose that places other-centred doing of gospel good, rather than self-centred safety, as an aspiration and a goal.

Such hope is abstract, but relevant, applicable to all generations, and not least this current one that is rising up.

Review: Inventing the Individual – The Origins of Western Liberalism

Cultural assumptions have historical roots. It is incumbent upon anyone who takes part in public debate or social engagement to explore them. In the current moment there is a growing appreciation that when it comes to the self-evident truths of the Western world – things like human rights and democratic values – our roots are firmly and inextricably embedded in our Christian heritage.



This conclusion is not simply the stuff of political rhetoric of the *Christian Concern* variety, nor even of decent apologetics like that of CPX or the recently released *Jesus the Gamer Changer* series. It's the stuff of thorough historiography. Larry Siedentop, formerly professor of Intellectual History at Sussex University, and fellow of Keble College, Oxford, and Lecturer in Political Thought, gives us

this stimulating monograph.

Like any careful teacher, Siedentop précises himself throughout. His epilogue, "Christianity and Secularism" contains a summary of the basic building block of his argument:

More than anything else, I think, Christianity changed the ground of human identity. It was able to do that because of the way it combined Jewish monotheism with an abstract universalism that had roots in later Greek philosophy. By emphasizing the moral equality of humans, quite apart from any social roles they might occupy, Christianity changed 'the name of the game'. Social rules became secondary. They followed and, in a crucial sense, had to be understood as subordinate to a God-given human identity, something all humans share equally... In one sense Paul's conception of the Christ introduces the individual, by giving conscience a universal dimension... Through its emphasis on human equality the New Testament stands out against the primary thrust of the ancient world, with its dominant assumption of 'natural' inequality. (pp352-3)

Siedentop is not, nor does he read like, a New Testament exegete or biblical theologian; he's a political philosopher. But his grappling with biblical texts is robust and fair and his understanding of early and middle Christian history is useful as a history text in its own right.

His last chapter, "Dispensing with the Renaissance" reveals his programme. The fundamental tenets of Western liberalism (moral equality and "natural rights" of individuals, representative government and institutions, and freedom of enquiry) were not novel discoveries of the modern age.

...I am not suggesting that the Renaissance did not matter, that it did not channel human thought, feeling and expression into new forms... But what I am maintaining is that as an

historiographical concept the Renaissance has been grossly inflated. It has been used to create a gap between early modern Europe and the preceding centuries – to introduce a discontinuity which is misleading. (p337)

His preceding chapters justify a continuity. Upon the Pauline building block of the salvation of “individual souls”, which counters the priority of aristocratic or familial obligations, he notes the “demolition of ancient rationalism” that was eventually completed by Augustine (p104). Early monasticism avoids compromise with the “aristocratic world” (p93) and implements an “utterly new form of social organisation” based on “voluntary association, in individual acts of will” (p94).

By the time Charlemagne attempts to reprise a Roman-like imperial rule, the “individual began to emerge as the unit of subjection, a social role as well as a moral status” (p154).

It is intriguing to see how the role of the church in the post-Carolingian feudal period *prevents* a recourse to an aristocratic illiberal world. Concepts that might now be caricatured as theocratic overreach were actually forms of emancipation. The church’s insistence of marriage as a sacrament undoes the last vestiges of absolute slavery (p171) by preventing men and women being bartered and bred. The sense of “divine right” of kings is actually a great leveller (p174); the king is not king by some ontological natural attribute, but by divine providence, and is therefore obligated to God as much as any other individual.

It’s a flip-side consideration that has contemporary impact. I am reminded of a conversation I had with a thoughtful person who was well versed in anti-discrimination law. In conversation about how I would approach a certain subject I began with the words, “Well, we’re all sinners.” To her look of dismay at such an unfortunate premise, I noted that that this understanding is fundamentally *egalitarian*: No one can claim moral authority in and of themselves, we are all

sinners. The crescendo of self-righteousness on all sides of contemporary debates indicates the value of humility that a mutual recognition of the divine could bring.

Siedentop's consideration takes us through the Cluniac reforms, in which the "purity" of monastic houses, and the freedoms of their volitional, individual members, were reinforced against local, feudal pressures. He demonstrates how the developing sense of papal sovereignty extended the moral sense of the "individual" such that it became a primary *social* role "shared equally by all persons" (p219). This inherently "bottom-up" conception shaped the development of canon law, as it grew to support the centralised papacy, bringing a form of universality of rights and obligations.

Civil structures were only later to catch up and, in so doing, moved the social framework away from realms towards nation-states with an embryonic social contract. And finally, the philosophical pieces of liberalism are fully in place as the Franciscan movement, countering the scholastic infatuation with Aristotelian rationalism, emphasised divine freedom (free from the constraint of a more fundamental essence or ideal) and a consequent human agency.

And all of this before the Renaissance!

It is only in the tumult of the Reformation, as the *enforcement* of belief becomes a prevalent political and social reality, that Siedentop sees the liberal ideas becoming manifest as an anti-clericalism, sowing the seeds that germinate and grow throughout the modern period and even bear fruit today.

Sidentop's history-telling is compelling and convincing. All would do well to ingest it, certainly before rejecting *fait accompli* the Christian world view as inherently repressive and totalitarian.

But the bigger question this raises for me is something of a

“so what?” There are two aspects to this:

Firstly, to the extent that liberalism is virtuous, how much does the current irreligious age put our liberalism at risk?

Christian origins might be apparent, but not conceptually necessary for many thoughtful liberals. What do we lose if we lose the understanding of origins? What difference does it make?

I suspect the difference at this point is not sociological but epistemological, and we must perhaps consider different *instantiations* of liberalism in the contemporary setting. You can have multiple points of view that share Siedentop’s liberal characteristics, but which vary greatly in application. The current differences on gender and sexuality are the prime example. For some, (ironically both traditional conservative and classical feminist), individual freedom is found in embracing and defending the biological aspects of human being as an essential part of identity. For others, individual freedom is to transcend or reject not just social constructions but the biological realities to which they attach. Both are “liberal” in their own internal sense, but are also at odds. From either point of view, the other constrains individual freedom.

I can therefore understand the argument by which the rejection of the Christian epistemological ground is seen as a path toward an illiberal “liberalism.” This is evident in current popular rhetoric (the “intolerance of tolerance,” “slippery slope” etc).

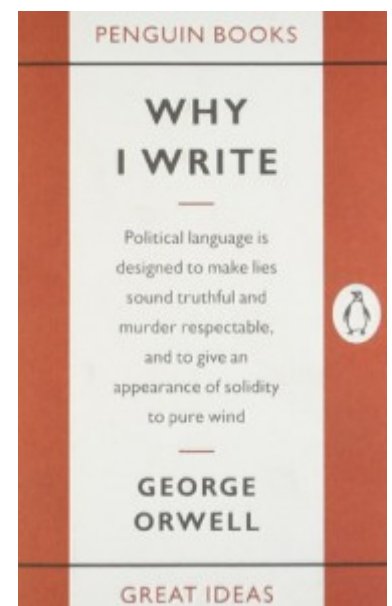
Secondly, to the extent that liberalism is not the gospel, what correctives are needed? We do well to focus on individualism, and recognise its primordial rejection of familial aristocracy. But where do concepts such as community and family and plurality enter in? There is power in introspection, but the gospel is more than just alleviating the anxiety of the introspective conscience, it is about the

commencement and completion of a “*chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation*” in which there is an *interdependence* of persons.

The postmodern reprise of both relationship and experience is a necessary corrective within the grand flow of philosophical history, and one that the Christian worldview is yet to adequately inform or harness. Any attempt needs a view of history that would learn a great deal from Siedentop.

Review: George Orwell's *Why I Write*

George Orwell is a touchstone of 20th Century literature, particularly political rhetoric. There are numerous commentators who have delved into the depths of classics such as *Animal Farm*. But when I finally got to reading (for the first time!) the definitive 1984 I thought I would go to Orwell himself to reveal his whys and wherefores.



I therefore read 1984 in conjunction with a short collection of Orwell's pieces. *Why I Write* has essays, stories, and the like written in the immediate context of the Second World War. 1984 was famously written in 1948, so we have an insight into its foundations.

There's no rhyme or reason to the content. I suspect Penguin

Books simply threw together some remains from a dead author. The contents range from authorial introspection ("All writers are vain, selfish and lazy, and at the very bottom of their motives there lies a mystery." *Why I Write* p10) through to cultural and political analysis.

The cultural considerations are partly a curiosity. The second piece, *The Lion & The Unicorn*, commences with a fascinating commentary entitled "England, Your England." Given my forthcoming relocation, I wonder if his observations hold true, even vestigially, 75 or so years on:

Here are a couple of generalizations about England that would be accepted by almost all observers. One is that the English are not gifted artistically...the English are not intellectual...another English characteristic which is so much a part of us that we barely notice it, and that is the addiction to hobbies and spare-time occupations, the privateness of English life... The most hateful of all names in an English ear is Nosey Parker.

(The Lion & The Unicorn pp14-16)

Of particular interest is his demarcation of a "popular culture." Is this Orwell's English equivalent of 1984's "proles"?

...in all societies the common people must live to some extent against the existing order. The genuinely popular culture of England is something that goes on beneath the surface, unofficially and more or less frowned on by the authorities. One thing one notices if one looks directly at the common people, especially in the big towns, is that they are not puritanical. They are inveterate gamblers, drink as much beer as their wages will permit, are devoted to bawdy jokes, and use probably the foulest language in the world. They have to satisfy these tastes in the face of astonishing, hypocritical laws (licensing laws, lottery acts, etc., etc.) which are

designed to interfere with everybody but in practice allow everything to happen. Also, the common people are without definite religious belief, and have been so for centuries. The Anglican Church never had a real hold on them, it was simply a preserve of the landed gentry, and the Nonconformist sects only influenced minorities. And yet they have retained a deep tinge of Christian feeling, while almost forgetting the name of Christ.

(The Lion & The Unicorn pp16-17)

I suspect these commonish characteristics are now much less hidden, and the "Christian feeling" is now a much fainter memory. We will see.

What is more intriguing, of course, is Orwell's political and rhetorical framework. **It's not always easy to translate Orwell into today's political world.** All "sides" of politics would love to seize 1984's polemic for themselves – to paint their enemies as "Ingsoc" and "Big Brother" and so justify their own virtue. I'm not sure whether it's Orwell's genius or simply the cataclysmic post-war changes that make this impossible. It is clear that 1984 is not written against the "left"; Orwell himself identifies as a democratic *socialist*.

Nor is it against the "right"; Orwell's caricature of capitalism ("What this war has demonstrated is that private capitalism... does not work. It cannot deliver the goods." p46) portrays it as impotent rather than evil.

Orwell's enemy is best described as *totalitarianism*. Clearly there is a correlation to the fascism of Orwell's day. But it also has a much more insidious form that is more immune to anachronism. On the one hand, Orwell recognises that there is no overt totalitarianism in his native land:

Everyone believes in his heart that the law can be, ought to be, and, on the whole, will be impartially administered. The totalitarian idea that there is no such thing as law, there

is only power, has never taken root. Even the intelligentsia have only accepted it in theory. (The Lion & The Unicorn, p 21)

But nevertheless, there is a limited form of totalitarianism, a *corruption* of sorts, that embraces injustice without cognition at the level of belief. Released of cultural inhibitions, is this not the essence of 1984's "doublethink" and its basic plot line, that dissent is not to be defeated, but *converted*?

Even among the inner clique of politicians who brought us to our present pass, it is doubtful whether there were any conscious traitors. The corruption that happens in England is seldom of that kind. Nearly always it is more in the nature of self-deception, of the right hand not knowing what the left hand doeth.

(The Lion & The Unicorn, p29)

...the British ruling class obviously could not admit to themselves that their usefulness was at an end. Had they done that they would have had to abdicate. For it was not possible for them to turn themselves into mere bandits, like the American millionaires, consciously clinging to unjust privileges and beating down opposition by bribery and tear-gas bombs. After all, they belonged to a class with a certain tradition... They had to feel themselves true patriots, even while they plundered their countrymen. Clearly there was only one escape for them – into stupidity. They could keep society in its existing shape only by being unable to grasp that any improvement was possible.

(The Lion & The Unicorn, p33)

Unlike his novels, in which the predicament is resolved only in the negative, the unadorned Orwell in this book gives some sort of vision for the way forward. It is, indeed, why he writes.

(From 5:08)

He is, in the main, incredibly insightful. The essay "Politics and the English Language" is a delightful and fascinating read. Clearly the writers of *Yes Minister* were influenced by his satirical consideration of "Sir Humphrey" bureaucrats! Even Boris Johnson (unknowingly?) concurs with his decrying the overuse of Latin roots (p91).

He reveals the roots of our modern-day sloganeering, the soil on which cries of "Stop the Boats!" or "Bigotry!" have taken root. It is nothing short of doublethink:

In our time it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing. Where it is not true, it will generally be found that the writer is some kind of rebel, expressing his private opinions, and not a 'party line'. Orthodoxy, of whatever colour, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style... A speaker who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance towards turning himself into a machine. The appropriate noises are coming out of his larynx, but his brain is not involved as it would be if he were choosing his words for himself... And this reduced state of consciousness, if not indispensable, is at any rate favourable to political conformity.

(Politics and the English Language pp113-114)

He points us to the use of euphemism ("if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them" p115) and weasel words and the whole toolkit. Surely there is nothing new under the political sun. Surely some of the social revisionism in Tasmania in recent years can, in this sense, rightly and precisely be called "Orwellian." Consider the following little gem. The "dishonest" use of such words is as prevalent as ever.

Other words used in variable meanings, in most cases more or less dishonestly, are: class, totalitarian, science, progressive, reactionary, bourgeois, equality.

(Politics and the English Language, p110)

Despite his insight, there is also naivete. Orwell does have a vision of an English Socialism that is not "Ingsoc." It involves good things such as educational reform and de-colonisation (which largely happened in the 1960's) but also nationalisation and income limitation (which generally failed where implemented after the war). Above all Orwell's leftwards lean appears unrealistically polite. Consider the intersection where I stand, at the corner of church and society:

It will disestablish the Church, but will not persecute religion. It will retain a vague reverence for the Christian moral code, and from time to time will refer to England as 'a Christian country'.

(The Lion & The Unicorn, pp83-84)

I cannot yet speak to my observations of England. But in Australia, and the Western World, there have been "disestablishing" cultural trajectories (in the broad sense of the word), and churches have been able to largely "come to terms" (p83) with it. But there is no "vague reverence" and no presumption of politeness. We've gone a little bit too Ingsoc for that.

Orwell has always been a secular prophet of an imprecise and imperfect sort. As all prophets do, he challenges, and provokes, and makes you think. Orwell about Orwell is a profitable read.

Sin

Two conversations have had me thinking about sin. Or to be more specific, what happens when we use the word “sin.” What actually gets communicated?

The first conversation was a wonderfully deep intelligent conversation in which I and my interlocutor were seeking mutual understanding on a whole swathe of issues. The relevant part involved a hypothetical where I was asked, “How would I speak to someone in situation X?” My response was, “I suppose I’d probably begin by saying ‘Well, we are all sinners.’” The response to this was some genuine, well-hearted, dismay... “Oh yes, that’s where you lot start from...”

What I intended in my response to the hypothetical was an attitude that eschewed holier-than-thou-ness or condemnation.

For my part, “We are all sinners” is the great leveller. It says “I am not better than you” and “I cannot condemn you, for if I did I would also condemn myself.”

It’s not like this was beyond the capacity of my conversationalist to understand. The conversation delved into areas of a relevant common human experience: how we all wrestle with both the broken parts and healthy parts of our lives; how even the most well-intentioned relationships cannot hold selfishness at bay 100% of the time; how in our finitude (if nothing else) we each end up committing and suffering harm. This is simple reality that we both recognised.

But somehow the word “sin” or “sinner” didn’t connote any of that...

The second conversation was with someone who has a Christian faith but lives in a non-Christian context. She shared the evisceral reaction to the word, because that reaction has been part of her world: “‘Sin’ doesn’t work, it get’s turned off and tuned out.”

But, it was noted, there are words that do work. “Brokenness” is one of them. Everyone of us can acknowledge that we are broken. “Darkness” is another, recognising the fact that sometimes we just want what we want, we do what we know is harmful and wrong. Even the phrase “rebellion against the things of life” gets more traction.

The conclusion of course, is not a new thought: The word “sin” doesn’t work as a word anymore. It doesn’t do what words should do – encapsulate and communicate meaning. It’s Christian jargon. But it’s worse than that, from this perspective **it signifies our self-justifying delusion, “sin” is our construct to justify our own existence and exercise power over others.**



This is not hard to understand, but it something we need to emotionally appropriate. An exercise for (the much caricatured) Christian conservatives might be something like this: You know how we feel when we get called bigots and hatemongers? We not only find it derogatory and disconnected from the reality of who we are, and hypocritically hateful, we also consider it as polemical self-justification: if they can maintain the rage against the bigoted Christians, they can get more votes. You know how that makes us feel? On the flip-side, for them, that’s what happens when we use the word “sin.”

So what do we do about it? Do we stop using the word? Perhaps. After all, our job is to communicate, and it’s not like the word is sacrosanct. Are we not preachers, homileticians? Our job is to connect the worlds and get the meaning across. Just as I don’t quickly use jargon words like “eschatology” or “propitiation” (although I do try to communicate the substance of them) perhaps we should also be careful in how we describe our harmatology.

It’s not like there isn’t precedent. In New Testament Greek

“sin” is ἁμαρτία (harmatia) which connotes “missing the mark” or “wandering from the path” of God’s good ways; it speaks to a more fundamental wrongward inclination. It is also παράπτωμα (paraptoma) which has more of the connotation of “trespass”, “wrongdoing” or “lapse”; it speaks more to specific actions that are wrong or done wrongly.

I think we are being lazy. Rather than communicating our intent, we use an ineffective jargon word, in which we expect even our interested listeners to do some semantical gymnastics in order to keep up with us. But even more worryingly, we end up lazy with our own thoughts, using a catch-all word where precision is necessary not only for mutual understanding, but for genuine expression that is also loving and caring.

Therefore, and to conclude, let us take a look at the pallid rainbow of the darkside of human existence. To be honest, even in my current use I wouldn’t apply the word “sin” in all these instances. But it seems, that when we use the word it may be taken that way. It’s worth a consideration; after all, if we use “sin” intending to communicate something akin to “wrongdoing” or “mistake” and it is heard as “evil”, we can do immeasurable harm.

EVIL: “Sin” pertains to those things that are utterly antithetical to the things of life. “Sin” reigned through the workings of Pol Pot and Hitler. “Sin” is manifest at it’s highest in serial killers and torturers. “Sin” is diabolical, demonic, irredeemably hell-bound.

CRUEL INTENTIONS: “Sin” pertains to those who delight in pain.

“Sin” pertains to sadistic abusers who are fully aware of what they are doing. This “sin” is not so much a desire to win but a desire to defeat others, no matter the cost. If it is not quite an evil lust for power, it is certainly a lust for control.

DELIBERATE REBELLION/HARD HEARTEDNESS: “Sin” pertains to those

who manifest selfishness at its utmost. "Sin" will cast others aside in order to get what is wanted. This "sin" is machiavellian in the extreme. Others are means to an end. Responsibilities cast aside, abandonment, and rejection. All this is "sin."

SENSUAL PASSIONS: "Sin" pertains to the idolatry of human passion. This is the domain of the "seven deadlies" – from raging anger, to rampant lustfulness, the flesh is king. Persons are reduced to animals, fresh meat, gold mines, for the satiation of appetite.

BONDAGE: "Sin" pertains to addictive behaviours. False comforts that are destructive, but provide temporary physical or emotional relief. Often in response to harms of the past, a destructive cycle becomes our own, and without consideration we ourselves become harmful.

NEGLIGENCE: "Sin" pertains to carelessness and neglect. Sins of omission which overlook or diminish others. Sins that refuse to see the image of God in the face of others. Racism and xenophobia, at the very least, are "sin" at this level.

MISTAKES: We stuff up. We hurt people. We harm them. And whether it is intended or not, such mistakes are our responsibility. We have done the wrong thing, and that is "sin."

BROKENNESS: We are wounded, we are hurting. And often this means we believe wrongly about ourselves. We think we are evil, when evil has been done to us. We root our very person into shames that have been wrought upon us. At a very gentle level, this thinking about ourselves is wrong – and like all "sin" we must turn away from it.

As a final thought: In writing the above, the usefulness of the word "sin" in covering them all is that there is one answer to all these dark things: Jesus. From the defeat of evil at the top, to the gentle healing of brokenness at the

bottom, he is the answer.

Conquering for the Commuter

A moment of reflection from this morning's drive while listening to Christy Nockels' *Healing is In Your Hands*:

Amongst the lyrics are echoes of Romans 8:35-39

*No mountain, no valley
No gain or loss we know
Could keep us from Your love*

*No sickness, no secret
No chain is strong enough
To keep us from Your love...*

*In all things we know that
We are more than conquerors
You keep us by Your love*

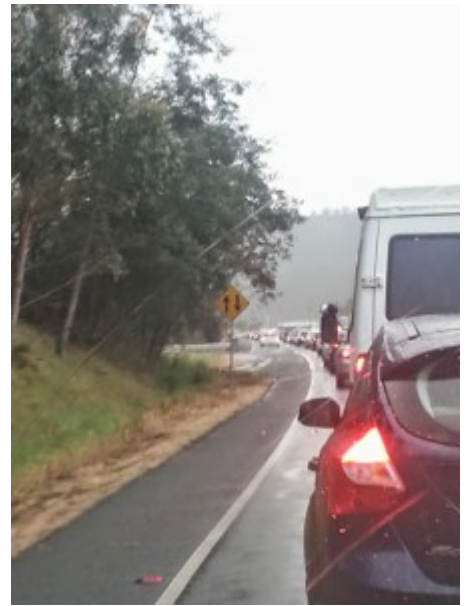
Romans 8:35-39 reads:

35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us

from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (ESV)

It's a passage that I know well. It's one of my favourites and has been a source of comfort for me when the emotions of the day feel like loneliness, anxiety, or even abandonment.



The phrase that struck me today is this: **“We are more than conquerors.”**

It's one of those phrases that has what I call “teleological significance.” It speaks to our *purpose*, our ambition, our direction, our goal. There's two facets to this:

The first recognises that what we observe in and around us in the world is a form of *conquering*. I see Islamic extremists beheading Christians; they are trying to *conquer* the world with their expression of Islam. I see areas of my own society, the Western World, which is blindly slipping into intolerant impositions that gives little value to freedom of conscience; it's another form of attempted conquering. It has ever been the way of the world. This should not surprise us.

The natural response is fear. What does the future look like? Will I and my children and my children's children be safe? To be safe, we look to *win*. We *fight* back. We use the same sword as what we perceive is against us: we spin and tear down, we demolish people as well as ideas, we demonise, we hound, we yell; we try to conquer.

The second facet recognises the reality: we are more than conquerors. And our safety and security rests not on the ways and woes of what is around us, but upon the love of God in Jesus Christ. The Kingdom of God is not headed by a weakened or sin-wracked king, but by the one who has conquered even death. The foundation of our ultimate citizenship is sure, as is the certainty of it's future. God is the God of history, do you think he has abandoned this part of it?

And on that basis we face the conquering hordes (whoever or whatever they might be), not with fear, but in love-filled confidence. We speak and act on truth with our confidence not in ourselves, but in the love of God. We apply ourselves to *his* purpose. We *invest ourselves* in *his* loving works. We seek to capture every thought that's floating through the social conscience and reimagine it in the light of the fact that God is actually real, and Jesus has actually risen and inaugurated the life of a renewed world. *He* is so much more than any pretentious conqueror. And we rest and work and have our being in *him*.

Snippet: School chaplaincy funding struck down in High Court

Link shared on facebook on Jun 19, 2014

While this has been and is likely to be touted, invalidly, as a separation of church and state issue, it is not that. (NB. I don't think anyone has been complaining about commonwealth funding of chaplains in the military).

Rather, the High Court has upheld that the manner in which chaplains are being funded is not constitutional: The

Executive alone does not have the power to do it like this (s61 of the Constitution), and nor does the legislature have the authority under s51 – the closest possibility (s 51.xxiiiA) allows funding of students via allowance, but not funding of services to students directly.

So all this will mean is that the funding stream will change – instead of from the commonwealth directly to the schools, it will be via a directed grant to the states.

My legally minded friends will correct me if I'm wrong in this, but I doubt the end result will be much different to the status quo.



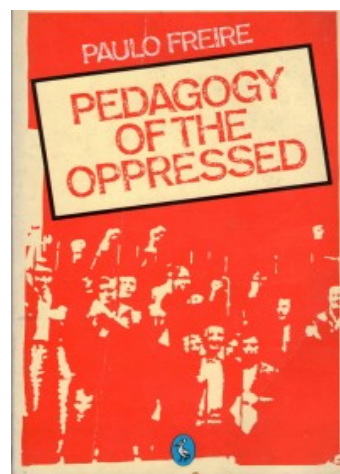
School chaplaincy funding struck down in High Court

www.abc.net.au

The High Court rules in favour of a challenge to the Commonwealth funding of the school chaplaincy program.

Review: Pedagogy of the Oppressed

It's a classic that I've not had the opportunity to read. Others will be familiar with the Brazilian author, *Paulo Freire*, and will be able to do a better job than I in placing him in the social volatility and the fomenting revolutionary thought of South America in the late 20th Century. You know, Che Guevara and all that.



My reasons for picking it up are different: It was partly due to an interlocutor on the internet who “encouraged” me to read it (I think as a defence of his position, which is strange because I don’t think Freire would approve of either his manner or method); but it was mostly due to my ongoing search for understanding as to the warps and wefts of Western political philosophy, and particularly that of progressive politics.

The reading of this book has brought me to two conclusions:

1. Western progressives do revolution really really badly.
2. Church (in the right mode) has the potential to do revolution (transformation?) really really well, as an expression of God’s project (= mission).

These are the matter of substance, and my ready point of application throughout the book.

Freire is an educator, and this *is* a pedagogy, a method or theory of *teaching*. The focus in this book is the context of an *oppressed* class within an *oppressive* societal framework.

The implicit goal of the book is to so educate the oppressed that they are no longer that.

But this does not mean freeing the oppressed as just an exchange of places within the oppressive regime – the oppressed learns to “win” at the oppression game, so to speak – but towards a revolution that doesn’t just eliminate the oppressor, but the oppression itself. If there were a broad brush-stroke critique of Western progressives from this book it is this – they are seeking to *win* the oppressing game, not transcend it; Western progressivism looks more like sectarianism – a reaction against “conservative” than anything that is likely to bring freedom and bring life.

Even in his initial broad terms, contemporary Western progressivism falls afoul of Freire’s fundamental pedagogical project – the promotion of *dialogical* interaction, and the

eschewing of objectifying didacticism. That is, there is no seeking to engage, there is a “telling what to do” in which a supposed “alignment with the oppressed” is grounds for pontification by a growing elite.

...a sectarian of whatever persuasion, blinded by his irrationality, does not (or cannot) perceive the dynamic of reality – or else he misinterprets it. (Page 17)

This is the error of both Left and Right. It's just that the Right are blind to others, and the Left are blind to themselves. Freire wants, rather, the “radical”:

The radical, committed to human liberation, does not become the prisoner of a ‘circle of certainty’ within which he also imprisons reality. On the contrary, the more radical he is, the more fully he enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he can transform it. He is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. He is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into dialogue with them. He does not consider himself the proprietor of history or of men, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he does commit himself, within history, to fight at their side. (Pages 18-19)

This radicalism is at the heart of Freire's pedagogy (and therefore his revolution). Like all good revolutionary theories, it is applicable at the small scale (in families, communities, church growth theories!) to the large scale (cultural revolution). It achieves this by being thoroughly humanistic, in the good sense of the word – engaged in the “humanisation” (we might say “flourishing”) that liberates both oppressed *and* oppressor, through transformation of both lives and the historical contextual surroundings of those lives.

As I progressed through *Pedagogy* I realised that some of the concepts were familiar; in my world they are picked up in

movements such as that of Missional Communities that are inherently dialogical in their mechanism and transformative (revolutionary?) in their intention. Moreover, there is a necessarily similar attitude with regard to their method. We might say “discipleship” – Freire talks about a pedagogy that must be “forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed” (Page 25). His is a method in which the oppressed find themselves, and therefore find that the surrounding system is reliant upon them, dependent on them, indeed, found “within” them – and is therefore graspable, changeable, and transformable.

There are even some common words to describe this means of transformation – *action-reflection*. For the church leader, this is the fundamental building block of discipleship. For Freire, it is the fundamentals of effective political action. I don't think the two are mutually exclusive.

Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building; it is to lead them into the populist pitfall and transform them into masses which can be manipulated. At all stages in their liberation, the oppressed must see themselves as men engaged in the ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human...

The insistence that the oppressed engage in reflection on their concrete situation is not a call to armchair revolution. On the contrary, reflection – true reflection – leads to action. On the other hand, when the situation calls for action, that action will constitute an authentic praxis only if its consequences become the object of critical reflection. (Page 41)

In the face of progressive (and other) politics that slip into sloganeering (imposing and asserting a predetermined culture, rather than walking with the people – oppressed and asleep

alike – to allow them to discover, and act upon, the truth) here is an incentive for gospel-hearted people and the church.

It is a thoroughly biblical framework of acting in the world, and reflecting it. The “reflection” aspect that is the natural locus of the church at work brings orthodoxy to practice and so foments and encourages and validates orthopraxy – right, revolutionary, world-changing actions.

This is the stuff of discipleship.

The rest of Freire’s book flows from this basis. In particular, his further work applies to the “teacher” or “leader” in the revolutionary context. This is invaluable for those engaged in church and the Western World. Freire’s force is to move leaders/teachers away from imposition and “bank deposit” teaching to dialogical teaching based on problem-solving – not mere academic problems, but problems in *reality* – in which *reality* itself mediates the disjointed approaches and different perspectives that are brought.

Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information... Indeed, problem-posing education, breaking the vertical patterns characteristic of banking education, can fulfill its function of being the practice of freedom only if it can overcome the [teacher-student] contradiction. Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers... They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow... Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught (Page 53)

This is an image that is antagonistic to much Western progressivism, which has become expert at “talking down.” But it is a wonderfully *pastoral* image that should be (but often isn’t of course) naturally embraced by church leadership. In fact, Freire remarks on the qualities of such a leadership – “love” (page 62), “humility” (page 63), “faith” albeit of a

humanistic sort (page 63), “trust” (page 64), “hope” (page 64), and “critical thinking” (page 64). These are not the hallmarks of Western progressivism, or the manner of rhetoric deployed in progressive politics in recent times. They should heed Freire:

Manipulation, sloganizing, ‘depositing’, regimentation, and prescription cannot be components of revolutionary praxis, precisely because they are the components of of the praxis of domination.” (Page 97)

Consider the emotive manipulation in the euthanasia debate, the sloganeering in every debate reduced to the cry of “bigot”, the regimentation needed to keep people “on message” and away from dialoguing about reality, and the tools of anti-discrimination law and other litigiousness to win the day. This is progressive politics at the moment. And it is oppressive.

When Freire talks about the anti-dialogical methods of “conquest” (page 109), “divide and rule” (page 111), “manipulation” (page 116), and “cultural invasion (page 116) – I think not only of the domination of the currently entrenched conservatives, but on the equal readiness for domination on the left. In the last few years of the political arc, people ran to what they thought was freedom, got imposition and “cultural invasion” and have run back. We live in an endless cycle of back and forth between two ends of the same oppression.

Towards the end Freire puts forward dialogical motivators – “cooperation” (page 135), “unity for liberation” (not for it’s own sake, note) (page 140), “organisation” (page 143), and, of most interest to me, “cultural synthesis” (page 146).

Here is the DNA of Christian mission – being in the world but not of it, not imposing, nor ignoring, nor objectifying, but *incarnating, participating, engaging*

In cultural synthesis, the actors who come from 'another world' to the world of the people do so not as invaders.

They do not come to teach or to transmit or to give anything, but rather to learn, with the people, about the people's world... the actors become integrated with the people, who are co-authors of the action that both perform upon the world... there are no spectators; the object of the actors' action is the reality to be transformed for the liberation of men.

Cultural synthesis is thus a mode of action for confronting culture itself, as the preserver of the very structures by which it was formed. Cultural action, as historical action, is an instrument for superseding the dominant alienated and alienating culture. In this sense, every authentic revolution is a cultural revolution. (page 147)

I don't see any of that in progressive (or conservative) politics. I just see more and more self-made people, imposing their world-view.

It isn't surprising, because in the end I don't think Freire's project is possible without divine intervention. It relies on rehumanising, rebirthing, regenerating, reengaging. And these are, without doubt, gospel applications and divine imperatives.

God help us.

Snippet: Anglican Mainstream

» Blog Archive » Doctors who oppose morning-after pill on conscience grounds...

Link shared on facebook on Apr 30, 2014

Tasmania is not unique in its willingness to establish a religious adherence when it comes to the practice of medicine. "This is a form of unjust discrimination against professionals on the basis of their personal beliefs and, indirectly, a form of discrimination against patients who share the same beliefs and who may wish to be treated by professionals with a sympathetic understanding of their position."



Anglican Mainstream » Blog Archive » Doctors who oppose morning-after pill on conscience grounds...

www.anglican-mainstream.net

Guidelines confirm that doctors and nurses who oppose controversial emergency contraception on 'moral or religious' grounds cannot receive key specialist qualifications