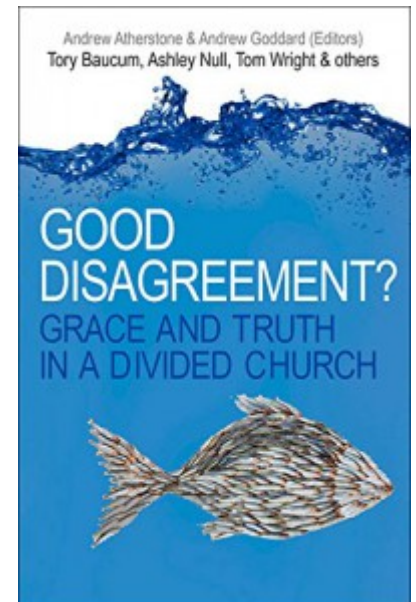


Review: Good Disagreement?

Pt. 8, Good Disagreement between Religions

I am continuing with my chapter-by-chapter, essay-by-essay review of *Good Disagreement?* Previously:



- Part 1: Foreword by Justin Welby
- Part 2: Disagreeing with Grace by Andrew Atherstone and Andrew Goddard
- Part 3: Reconciliation in the New Testament by Ian Paul
- Part 4: Division and Discipline in the New Testament Church by Michael B. Thompson
- Part 5: Pastoral Theology for Perplexing Topics: Paul and Adiaphora by Tom Wright
- Part 6: Good Disagreement and the Reformation by Ashley Null
- Part 7: Ecumenical (Dis)agreements by Andrew Atherstone and Martin Davie

To be frank I found this chapter to be frustrating. In my mind there's two approaches to interfaith interactions: the "hide yourself" strategy, and the "generously be yourself" strategy. The first is, at its end, is a form of nihilism. The second is honest but difficult.

There is much to admire in Bp. Toby Howarth's approach in this chapter. A generous gospel is apparent. The frustration lies in what I see to be some small, but significant, mis-steps.

Right up front, he recognises gospel distinctives and imperatives:

Some believe that religious disagreement is essentially illusory. If, they say, we could only see deeply enough and clearly enough the essentials of our superficially differing faiths, we would understand that we really all agree... My assumption in this chapter is that there is real substantial difference between religions... Not only do we believe and behave differently, many of us would like to see people from other religions change so that they believe and behave as we do, converting to belong to our faith community. (p132)

I wholeheartedly agree with this. In the aftermath of the Martin Place hostage-taking in Sydney late last year we encountered this assumption of illusion. I wrote at the time:

So when I stand in unity with my Muslim neighbours, it is not because we have been able to transcend our differences, it's because we have found within (informed, shaped, and bounded by) our world view a place of common ground. And so the Christian doesn't stand with a Muslim because "we're all the same really" – no, the Christian stands with the Muslim because the way of Christ shapes our valuing of humanity, our desire to love our neighbour, and even our "enemy" (for some definition). I can't speak for the Islamic side of the equation, but I assume there are deep motivations that define the understanding of this same common ground. Take away that distinctive and you actually take away the foundations of the unity, the reasons and motivations that have us sharing the stage right now.

The attempt to render religious differences as illusion is

therefore incredibly illiberal and actually antagonistic to a healthy, harmonious, multi-religious society. I'm glad Howarth affirms this.

Similarly, Howarth's experience are beneficial contributions to the more general "good disagreement." In this series of reviews the importance of *honesty* has been mentioned a number of times. Here Howarth reminds us that this necessarily includes *emotional* honesty, even *vulnerability* and admissions of fear.

The consideration of the Non-Violent Communication (NVC) approach is therefore helpful. It "encourages people... to listen not only to others but also to their own feelings and needs" (p136). This is necessary to ensure that we are not mishearing others: I have often encountered those who are emotionally reacting against what they *think* my position is, not what it actually is; I should avoid doing the same.

Vulnerability also puts one's own emotional reactions out in the open, where they can be assessed and addressed. This cuts across and defuses bigotry. I attempted to reflect on this during the divisive 2012 same-sex marriage debate in Tasmania, but it was a one-sided exercise.

The current mode of good disagreement in the Church of England is the Shared Conversations process. To the extent that this achieves constructive **honesty and vulnerability** it's a necessary step for good *disagreement*. I doubt it is sufficient for actual *agreement* on the issues at hand. In the short-term it may actually lead to an increase in pain, because honesty and vulnerability fully articulates the *cost* of a position or prospective decision. Having had one's vulnerability fully acknowledged, and genuinely comprehended, there is no sense in which the wounds can be covered by ignorance; decisions will need to be made in full knowledge of the potential hurts.

In the interfaith scope Howarth recognises this reality; the

tensions of maintaining relationship with the Hindu community in the light of the Archbishop of Canterbury's commitment to evangelism (pp137-138) is a great example. The consequent act of maintaining relationship, even sharing meals, with the Hindu community is delightful. But it doesn't remove the offence, it merely mitigates it. It's a generous, gracious, *neighbourly* response.

The reason why good fences make good neighbours is because they protect against *encroachment* and thus provide a place of safety from which to be gracious. Irresolvable differences can be left in perpetual abeyance only when there is a degree of separation, as there are between religions. Unfortunately, in the current internal conflicts about Scripture and sexuality, we are dealing with conflict in the family, where there is not enough separation to prevent encroachment, and so the potential for gracious interaction is reduced.

There is therefore a degree of inapplicability of these interfaith thoughts to the current conflict. This is compounded by a few mis-steps that I think Howarth exhibits:

Firstly, he fails to avoid **a false-dichotomy between story and doctrine.**

Story is always present in religious disagreement. Sometimes we pretend that it isn't... In my experience, male religious leaders are particularly prone to addressing difference in this way. We look at texts; we discuss doctrines. (p136)

His attempt at a both-and ("while this important... it often needs to be complemented" p137) reinforces story and doctrine as essentially competitive, requiring a balance. His caricature of Trinitarian presentation on page 138 may be accurate in some circumstances, but he has himself flattened the experience of doctrine. It is not enough to fill it out with reference to the historical Nicene narratives, but by the Trinitarian experiences of everyday folk in the here and now.

Doctrine fills out story and story fills out doctrine!

Doctrine gives me language and understanding in which to live out my story. My story grounds my doctrine and pushes me to mull and mull until it is real and applicable. We don't need story to balance out doctrine; we need our doctrine filled out with the real world, and our experience of the real world filled out with lively doctrine.

Secondly, he doesn't adequately deal with the reality that **it takes two to tango**. What do you do in dialogue if the other side won't talk, or won't come to the same place of honesty and vulnerability?

I admire this sentiment:

Foundational to the different approaches that I have referred to here is a commitment to the often slow and painstaking work of developing relationships, especially by listening to the other person's story and sharing one's own. (p139)

But this presupposes that the other person is willing to share, and willing to listen. At what point is it *inappropriate* to give yourself over to another? Mark Durie, who regularly dialogues with Islam in the Australian context, considers how even generosity can be misinterpreted negatively. Similarly, there are many who see the ever-increasing illiberalism of progressive politics, and the misuse of anti-discrimination law in particular, as removing a safe-place for the sharing of a traditional point of view. I would hope that many would err on the side of risk-taking vulnerability, but how do you protect against possible entrapment?

And finally, there is the dangerous and self-defeating direction of **hiding the gospel** for the sake of engagement.

Howarth does not eschew Christian distinctives. He values "persuasion and conversion" (p144) and notes that "not all

conflict is destructive" (p145). Nevertheless he does slip from the "generously be yourself" mode to the "hide yourself" mode.

The problem is that of the elevation of abstraction. This is when Jesus is reduced to a particularisation of an abstract gospel. For example, it is common to hear logic along the following lines: Jesus loves people, therefore we are called to love, therefore if we all love one another then your philosophy and my Christianity are essentially the same.

Jesus is used as a particularisation of an abstract aspiration, in which differences are illusory. The gospel actually operates in the opposite direction: We are called to Jesus, Jesus loves (in fact, *defines* ultimate love), therefore we love as Jesus loves.

We see hints of this abstraction when Howarth uses Jesus to particularise the abstract desire to not "focus on dividing communities along religious lines rather than fighting the poverty and oppression itself" (p147). We see hints of it again in the exposition of the Samaritan woman when "God is present, in Christ, as the walls come down." (p148) Jesus has become the particularisation of the abstract divinity of torn-down walls. Similarly the covenant encounter of Jacob with God in Genesis 28 (p149) is taken out of context, applied to Jacob's later interactions with Esau in Genesis 33, and so covenantal divine encounter becomes a particularisation of abstract brotherly reconciliation.

This no mere nitpick. It's a difference that is at the heart of cross-purposes in the current debate. One side moves from the abstract ("How do we love, accept, and include?") and defines them by Christ ("By following him"); the other moves from Christ ("Jesus loved, accepted and included") and absolutises the abstract ("We must follow the path of love, acceptance, and inclusion"). The difference is subtle – both mention Jesus – but substantial. In one Jesus is the goal, in the other he is simply a particular form of a larger concept.

In one Jesus defines and contrasts, in the other he simply informs. Same language, different meanings. Without recognising it we cannot disagree well.

In conclusion, there are some valuable insights in this chapter. It challenged me at a number of points to examine my feelings and motivations, as well as my thoughts about such things as establishment and the role of the state in religious affairs. But in the end, there was frustration. I'm all for kenosis, and empathy, and generosity... but in the end we are still who we are, defined by Jesus, and that is the starting point of dialogue; awareness of self. If we try to examine dialogue from afar, if we confine ourselves to objectivity and mediation from the abstract, we lose our very sense of identity, and have nothing to say. And silence is very rarely good disagreement.

Next: Part 9: From Castles to Conversations by Lis Stoddard and Clare Hendy & Ministry in Samaria by Tory Baucum

Skepticism About Unity and Religions of Peace

Islamophobia has been the phrase used to describe those that attack, belittle, and generally vilify Muslim people and the Islamic faith. In this last week, in response to the terrible events in Sydney, we have seen plenty of real islamophobia. I've seen everything from Pauline Hanson quotes on facebook to my Iranian friends (who are actually Christian, but fit the



physical middle eastern stereotype) feeling scared on the streets and in the shopping malls. The #illridewithyou impromptu movement has been a worthy, albeit imperfect, response to this real xenophobia.

The response from the Islamic leadership and the Muslim community to the siege in Sydney has been appropriate and right. The evil actions have been absolutely condemned. Condolences have been offered. Again, I have seen in my Iranian friends (including those who are Muslim) the collective sense of shame and betrayal that they feel about this man. Not only has he dishonoured his compatriots, he has betrayed them, who have escaped the trauma of their homeland, by bringing such trauma to their new home.

I have admired the response to the response. Christian, Muslim, and Jewish leaders have moved towards each other with shared prayer times and other expressions of unity. To the extent that we can stand united, as Australians, and as fellow human-beings, this is the right attitude to have.

BUT, and there is a “but”, I have some skepticism when it comes to the level of populist engagement with it all.

1) “Unity” at the expense of distinctives is actually divisive.

I have heard on the radio a montage of last week that has John Lennon as the backing track (“...and no religion too, imagine all the people, living life in peace...”). While nice and sentimental, it is unhelpful on so many levels, consider:

- It misunderstands the role of religion. It presumes nominalism – that people are religious in name only, and religious adherence is merely a facade. Facades can be discarded for the sake of something deeper. But this is not the reality. For many, their religion is already about the deepest depths of who they are. This is true of both Christians and Muslims, and of the Secular

Humanists too! At a personal level, “religion” and “world-view” are coextensive – it defines and informs a person’s, and a community’s, identity, purpose, morality, ethics, relationships, self-worth and view of others. It is exhaustive and is not something that can be flipped on and off at whim. It’s why changing religion is called a *conversion* – it is a total realignment.

- It presupposes that tolerance only comes from the transcendence of religion. It was wrong in Lennon’s time, and it’s wrong now. It’s actually a politically-correct form of xenophobia. Real peacefulness seeks to overcome fear of the different. This “transcending” philosophy actually seeks to eliminate the difference altogether. “You all worship the same God after all, right? It’s all about loving each other, right?” actually causes an elimination of identity through the elimination of distinctives. It is progressive humanism doing what it always does, failing to recognise itself and thereby imposing itself on others. It is the opposite of pluralism.

So when I stand in unity with my Muslim neighbours, it is not because we have been able to *transcend* our differences, it’s because we have found *within* (informed, shaped, and bounded by) our world view a place of *common ground*. And so the Christian doesn’t stand with a Muslim because “we’re all the same really” – no, the Christian stands with the Muslim because the way of Christ shapes our valuing of humanity, our desire to love our neighbour, and even our “enemy” (for some definition). I can’t speak for the Islamic side of the equation, but I assume there are deep motivations that define the understanding of this same common ground. Take away that distinctive and you actually take away the foundations of the unity, the reasons and motivations that have us sharing the stage right now.

2) What on earth is a “religion of peace”? Depending on how you define it, I’ve got some big questions for Islam.

We all love peace. None of us love violence. Except that that is not true in an absolute sense. Sometimes we need to fight injustice, and sometimes we need to punish bad people by doing “violence” to their life or liberty. All it takes for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing. And so even Christians have the doctrine of the “just war” motivated by standing against tyranny. But then again, the whole point of exercising justice is to bring about the peace that was removed by the injustice. In an imperfect world, peace sometimes rests on ethically bounded acts of violence.

In this broadly brushed sense, Christianity is a “religion of peace” and so is Islam. We want peace, but we don’t like injustice either.

Most of us have peace as the loftiest and deepest of goals. And because these goals are informed by our religious depths (see above), ultimate peace and endpoint-of-religion often go together. This is basic eschatology. Christians believe that the return of Christ will usher in the fullness of rest; the triumph of the Prince of Peace is the advent of a time when tears are wiped away and lions lay down with lambs. Jews, as I understand it, are awaiting their Messiah, who will lead them out of exile into the shalom of life perfectly shaped, inwardly and outwardly, by Torah. Muslims, as I understand it, associate ultimate peace with all humanity united in Islam, perfectly faithful to shariah and living in perfect submission to Allah’s way.

There are differences but clear similarities in these eschatologies. Again, in these broad eschatological brushstrokes Christianity is a “religion of peace” and so is Islam – but we mean something different about the focus and shape of what that peace is.

The sticking point is when it comes to seeking to “advance” the religious cause.

Christians, for instance, are keen to see their neighbours “come to Christ” and convert. In doing this, ideally, they are motivated by a constructive belief that the way of Christ is the way of renewal, restoration, and reconciliation, that brings life and freedom. Ideally, the method of the Christian is persuasion and example. The gospel is *proclaimed*, and the life of Christ *is witnessed* through the Christ-imitating ways of Christ’s followers. Violence is not only avoided, it is explicitly prohibited. Jesus commands the sword be put away, even at the cost of his own life. It is grace, not force, kindness and welcome, not compulsion, that leads to the proclamation of truth, the furthering of justice, and reconciliation with God and others in Christ.

In this *methodology* the phrase “religion of peace” is clearly applicable to Christianity. Yes, there are extremists who have used violence in the name of Christ – from the crusades to Westboro Baptist. But the way of these extremists do not accord with the way of their founder, the heart of their supposed religion. The answer to any Christian extremism is not whether or not the extremist is supported or rejected by fellow Christians, it’s whether or not that extremist is supported or rejected by Jesus. “Jesus never did it that way” is the answer to any Christian warmonger.

But I am skeptical about Islam. The more I learn about the way of Islam’s founder, Mohammed, the more I worry about his methodology.

On the one hand, I can affirm it: I can see the vast majority of Muslims, particularly in the Western World, following the peaceable ways of Mohammed during his early years in Mecca.

At this time Mohammed did not have political or military power and preached harmony and non-violent engagement, particularly with other “people of the book.” The “higher

“jihad” speaks of the war against the destructive passions of the human person. There is much common ground with the Christian here for sure.

But on the other hand, I question it. When I hear about the ways of Mohammed in his later years in Medina I hear of conversions by the sword, the dhimmitude servility expected of Christians, and oppressive enforcement of shariah law. I cannot ignore this. This picture of Islam seem to be in accord with the general vibe of Muslim majority nations, particularly in the Middle East: the denigration of women, and the oppression of freedoms and other religions.

Furthermore, I cannot ignore the testimony of my brothers and sisters who have converted from Islam, having experienced firsthand, spiritual and physical violence in the name of Islam.

There is little, if any, common ground here for me to find. The end problem is that I do not see how to find it. It's not enough to point to the thousands/millions of Muslims who eschew such ways, if that doesn't tell me how to say to a violent jihadist, “this is not the way of Mohammed.” Because it does look like his way! It seems like peace only in the sense of the “pax romana” – peace when Islam wins, peace through subjugation! And I cannot agree that that is peace at all.

In fact, it looks like an injustice. And an injustice is something I can't be peaceable about. And I would “fight” it in some sense. In the very extreme, many of my brothers and sisters in recent months have “fought” it by dying for their faith in Northern Iraq and Syria.

So there's a complexity within Islam. It's a complexity within the life of Mohammed himself. It's a complexity that, if I am to respect distinctives, I must engage with. Finding the common ground on one side, questioning deeply on the other.

And of course, my engagement must be in accord with my own methodology: declaration of God's truth, persuasion, demonstration of God's love.

In embracing truth, I must question whether "religion of peace" language is helpful. Does it actually help us get to the truth, to real respect for distinctives and motivations, or is it just another way of glossing over?

In embracing persuasion, I must ask questions. They are not unanswerable and I may learn something, but they also make a point: "Islam is a religion of peace" must be met with "What do you actually mean by that? How do you embrace this foundational teaching, or this behaviour of the devout, that appears to contradict the way of peace?" I can even put my own perspective: "Let me tell you about the truest peace I have ever known, I have found it in Jesus Christ."

In embracing demonstrations of love, I continue to welcome. I recognise a fellow human. I recognise someone wrestling with the deep things of life, and empathise. In particular, in my context where I am the "majority" I use that position to stand against xenophobia.

Do I want to get rid of Muslims from my country? No!

Will I associate a nutcase who takes the name Muslim with the essence of that religion? No!

Will I refuse to share common ground, particular in times of national emotional unity? No!

Will I ride with them, and speak up for those who feel mistreated? Yes! Absolutely!

But I'll still have some big questions...