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 millenial 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.

Disagreeing with a Judgemental World

The touchstone of contemporary apologetics is not *rationality* ("Is belief in God logical?") but *ethics* ("Is belief in God morally wrong?")

Often, a religious person is portrayed as a caricature: It is supposed that belief in God involves submission to absolutist and outdated moral stances. This necessarily involves the believer repressing both their naturally inquisitive mind and their naturally tender conscience. It is concluded that the religious believer has therefore embraced a sociopathy that has some good but a lot of bad and is ultimately reprehensible.

It is an understandable picture. Much has been done in the name of God that *is* reprehensible. Some fundamentalist frameworks *do* lead to the repression of intellect or

conscience or both. This is the case, however, for tyrants of both religious and non-religious persuasions. It's enough to make you sceptical about the natural goodness of humanity!

But the caricature remains. It is simply presumed. The other day a young Christian I know was accosted out of the blue with the assertion, "You hate me because I'm gay and you're a Christian." It's not just a sexuality thing. Replace the word "gay" with some other descriptor (e.g. "muslim", "atheist", "scientist", "person who likes to have fun") and the dynamic remains. It is how young people of faith are treated in the prevailing popular mood.

Ironically, of course, those who assert the caricature are actually reflecting it. It's a gavel-banging declaration: **<u>"I judge that you are judging me and so I condemn you for it."</u>**   There is no enquiry in this statement, no generous observation or gracious listening. The caricature is projected onto the "other" irrespective of whether it fits or not. The particular dignity, principles, thoughts and feelings of that person are irrelevant: they are guilty by association with an abstraction!

We need to lead our young people into understanding this dynamic and responding in an opposite spirit, one that truly demonstrates gentleness and grace without conforming to the pressures and assumptions of a judgemental world.

<u>The real danger is that we Christians come to agree with the caricature ourselves</u>. We can come to accept the judgement that "we" (for some definition of us religious folk) are, by that very fact, dangerously judgemental. And then our judgemental reflection, our projection, is placed on God himself. Our wrestle with the Bible and with godly principles of Christian living collapses into a capitulation: "What God does and says is judgemental and so I judge him worthy of condemnation."

In some ways this is no surprise. It is not for no reason that the the biblical account of humanity's fall begins with a questioning of God's character. *"Did God really say? God knows that you would become like him."*

We capitulate to the caricature when we <u>agree with its</u> assertion. "You're right, the Bible is clearly outdated and doesn't speak the truth as we know it." When we do this we are simply making God in our own image. The end game of that is tyranny and philosophical anarchy: There is no higher authority or principle to appeal to; we have a cacophony of individuals asserting that what they say is true is actually what is true.

We capitulate to the caricature when we <u>reinforce</u> the assertion by combatting it on its own terms. "You're the one who is wrong, the Bible condemns you! You must submit or be damned!" By this we become part of the tyranny, just another one of the voices claiming that their truth wins.

We can only avoid capitulating by turning not to ourselves and some sense of self-righteousness, but by embracing confidence in the trustworthiness of God's character. That is, by growing in *faith*.

<u>The way forward is to deliberately choose a posture of *trust* in God as a good parent.</u> Trust is earned, and can be nurtured. It involves honesty, and takes risks: *"Yes, this part of the Bible is difficult to read. But let's wrestle with it, let's grapple it. If we stand over it we will not learn anything, but if we begin on the foundation that God is good, how then are we confronted, provoked, taught, and grown by what we read and see?"*

We know from our own experience as children of the times when we questioned our parent's character, particularly when we were being disciplined, or when a family decision takes a difficult path. But we grew to trust. And we came to

understand what was going on, and to even respect and agree with what we were taught through those times. Our trust grows, and we are shaped, corrected, and transformed as we go on that journey.

This posture helps us, then, to relate to others. We don't meet judgementalism with judgementalism. We respond with the truth ("What you say I believe is not actually the case.") and an invitation to journey ("This where I've come from, this is what I'm learning at the moment. Where are you coming from?"). Or, as St. Peter did saith:

> *…in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. (1 Peter 3:15-16)*

Review: Two books by Tom Frame #2 — Losing My Religion

Losing My Religion is the second Tom Frame book I have read recently. The title says it all — it's about "Unbelief in Australia." Frame is a bishop in the Anglican Church and the head of a theological institution and this book is a passionate attempt to understand the context of his church and his gospel. With the long-term prevalence of anti or non-religious sentiment in Australian society, and it's growing impact, it is a worthy examination.
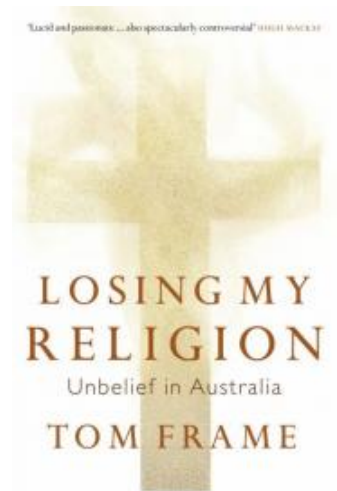
In this sense, this book is not an apology for the Christian faith as much as it is a consideration of that which the Christian faith must interact with or make a defense to. He sets out his agenda clearly; to give the background or context for unbelief in Australia, to examine the causes of unbelief and "the reasons for the loss of religious beliefs in Australia", and finally the "consequences of unbelief" (Page 7).

Perhaps wary of the critiques he will receive from positive atheists and other more militant nonbelievers (not that I've come across any review from an obviously anti-theistic point of view, pointers welcome in the comments) Frame spends a significant amount of time defining his terms — "faith", "belief", "disbelief", "unbelief", positive and negative atheism and anti-theism etc. This is a necessary precursor to examining statistics and other background material about the extent of unbelief in Australia. It is also extremely useful to cut across the grand sweeping statements that abound in this area about the death or religion (on the one hand) or the up and coming rise of the religious right (on the other hand). Some myths are dispelled simply by knowing what you're talking about.

The section on the causes of unbelief is also very useful. His broad overviews are excellent introductions to history —

the rise and fall of different philosophies and their impact, the various characters in the development of science and how they are taken today. It is good solid stuff and for the most part quite objective. It is only in the examination of the theological response to unbelief (characterised as "confusion and incoherence") that you do sense some of the passion he has for the church to get this engagement right.

If this book is controversial (as Hugh Mackay's imprimatur on the cover says) I think that controversy rests in his section on the "consequences" of unbelief. He attacks the so-called New Atheists (Dawkins, Hitchens et al.) — whom he calls anti-theists — not so much for their position, but for their attitude.   He finds that this intolerance infects not just intellectual debates but the whole concept of secularism in a way that corrupts true plurality and makes it a form of tyranny.

> *"I want to conclude this discussion of tolerance by highlighting my concern that changing attitudes towards religious beliefs will have a bearing on attitudes towards all beliefs in Australia. When it becomes acceptable, even admirable, to mock and ridicule a person's religious convictions and customs — especially when the intention is to provoke an indignant reaction — the next step is to prohibit the expression of religious sentiments in all public places and forums. This has been the approach of the French Government in recent years and there are signs that Australia is poised to do likewise under the guise of promoting social cohesion and cultural harmony. Citizens are free to hold religious beliefs and to act on them, but only in their personal lives and only within their homes. Once religion is completely privatised, the next step usually involves incursions on freedom of conscience and obstructions to the right of free association. We are some way from this kind of tyranny but it must be recognised that movements in this direction are usually incremental… I believe that*

contemporary anti-theism has some of the characteristics of fundamentalism and, like all fundamentalisms, needs to be opposed." (Pages 267-268)

Frame therefore calls for a genuine secularism in Australia. He also calls for a genuine church that can engage within this freedom, not presuming belief, not using coercion, but taking its place in the market place of ideas and so exhibiting a genuine spirituality with a substantial kerygma.

This is a unique book. It mixes polemic with vulnerability, precision with empassioned argument. It is prophetic for both church and world. For those who are persistent in their derision, it will be ignored. For others it will be provide food for thought and a basis for conversation. In that sense it lives out what it envisions — a genuine engagement.

My only concern is that it is a bit too "meta" — a book about books, an idea about ideas. It doesn't so much argue the gospel of Christ but for the *space* for the gospel of Christ. That's no bad thing though, and the question of how to fill that space, how to preach the gospel well in the light of unbelief, is a whole new task.