

The Future of Tolerance, Belligerence, and Good Disagreement.



In the light of reading *Good Disagreement?* I found Maajid Nawaz' *Big Think* video on dialogue and the Future of Tolerance of interest.

I don't know much about Nawaz but he appears to be a centrist at the hinge point of moderate Islam. He recounts a constructive dialogue with atheist Sam Harris. They continue to disagree but have disagreed well. The video is well worth a watch (embedded at the end of this post) but his main points towards good disagreement are:

Adversarial Collaboration

An agreement between opposing parties about how they'll work together or gain a better understanding of their differences.

Emotional Process

"Re-humanizing" your adversary, even though you disagree with his or her perspective. Try to see the other person holistically, as someone with valid human experience.

Intellectual Process

First, identify common ground. Isolate specific points of agreement.

Practice intellectual empathy. Acknowledge when the internal logic pattern of a n argument makes sense, even though you may disagree with the premise.

Recognize your own moral compass and maintain your courage.

These points are well made. *Good Disagreement?* arrives at many of them, grounded on a Christian worldview. I would love to see Nawaz' philosophical underpinnings. Emotional and intellectual honesty, personal generosity, with the courage to maintain your convictions... these appear to be the ingredients for constructive tolerance. I applaud his stance.

It doesn't mean it's easy. There are two significant difficulties:

a) Nawaz and Harris can exercise these qualities because of their existing separation. What I mean is that, apart from the vague obligations of living on the same planet and in the same society, they have no need to interact or collaborate.

They can approach their interaction from a relative position of great freedom, and part ways at relatively little cost.

Disagreements that are "in-house" are more fraught. When the institutional, historical, or even theological, ties are strong, that freedom of separation is reduced and good disagreement is hampered.

In that circumstance another component is needed: a form of "giving each other space." The Church of England is still working out what this means internally; the Shared Conversations are the current attempt as I understand it. In the wider Anglican Communion troubles of the last decade or two the gift of space was attempted through instruments such as indaba and moratoria (on same-sex blessings and ordinations, and episcopal incursions) and these simply proved to be not enough.

The creation of ACNA and the GAFCON movement has codified a separation and encouraged its members (crf. Nawaz' last point.) This movement is in many ways unfortunate (who wanted to have these disputes anyway?) but has been quite *necessary*, not least for the purposes of good disagreement. My hope is that this invigorated confessional identity, which clearly demarcates a philosophical and increasingly institutional separation, will not only catalyse clarity in the disagreement but also generous interaction. My hope that this will occur at the forthcoming meeting of Primates, from both sides. But that brings up the second point:

b) It takes two to tango. Nawaz recounts a constructive interaction with a similar motivated interlocutor. This isn't always the case. In my experience the most machiavellian groups are self-styled as tolerant and progressive. There's a belligerent political strategy: seek dramatic change using absolutist rhetoric, and in the face of consequent dramatic resistance, complain about the hard-hearted impositional schismatic "refuses to dialogue" bigotry of the other party.

Of course belligerence begets belligerence in a vicious circle intertwining both sides of a debate. But the burden is uneven. When there are proposals for fundamental and irreversible change on the table, the risk of good disagreement is higher for those who oppose the change. In a place of belligerent stalemate, the risk of stepping back to good disagreement for the proponents of change is, at worst, a "non-decision" of the status quo. The risk to the opponents is that the irreversible change occurs. This is why decrying bad disagreement works unevenly, and why it can be used politically to take resistance to change out of the game; you'll hurt yourself, but you'll hurt your opponent more.

All in all, unless both parties turn away from belligerence at *the same time*, good disagreement simply isn't. Nawaz talks about his good disagreement as a delicate exercise. A similar delicacy is needed in the context of Anglican good

disagreement. It is why I admire those who are seeking to bring it about.

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