

Along the track

Appreciating and Growing from Difference

We live in strange times. While more and more people are claiming atheism or agnosticism, there is a rise in fundamentalist activity everywhere with horrifying consequences at times. We tend to attach the term 'fundamentalist' to people of certain religious beliefs but there is also a rise in fundamentalist behaviour among those who profess atheism or those who espouse 'no religious belief'. When there are 'no religious beliefs', there can be, in some, a tendency to justify one's stance by belittling the beliefs of others. That is not just insensitive but displays arrogance - it is just as intolerant and provocative as religious fundamentalism.

Spirited discussion about sport or politics or religion is part of our culture. That's not the same as sneering at others' beliefs, their faith - they are part of who they are, their essence, their spirit, what motivates their deepest actions. Putting down other's professed atheism doesn't help either. Questioning that, seeking to understand where they are coming from, and why, is healthy - derision is not. It's simply being judgemental about something we don't fully understand and feeling superiority (or perhaps insecurity) because of that. We are all on a journey of discovery, we are all seeking to go deeper, to find meaning in life.

If we do profess to have faith, it isn't a bad thing to have one's beliefs questioned, challenged even. It makes us think, it makes us reflect on why these beliefs and traditions are dear to us, why they motivate us, how we live them out for the betterment of other people. It helps us to be honest with ourselves. Religious beliefs are not just something we 'hold' - they have a purpose, firstly to try to describe what we have come to understand about God and how God relates to us and we to God. They will never sufficiently describe God - we don't have the language for that, for a start. But they also serve to motivate us to action. In Jesus' words, the litmus test for following him is best described in how we treat others. His description of the Last Judgement is very clear on that (Mt 25: 31-46).

But because I may hold a different point of view from others, or I may see the world or the purpose of life from a different perspective, that doesn't give me the freedom to mock or deride others' beliefs. And vice versa. Being unfamiliar or ignorant of another's beliefs is not a license to offend. Constructing our identity, particularly our religious identity (or lack of) on the basis of opposition to others and needing to forever protest our own uniqueness and truth against what we perceive others may believe is unhealthy, to say the least, perhaps even basically dishonest.

What's familiar is comfortable and offers us security. We feel safe and secure and we all need that at times. But if we stay there, we don't grow or deepen our faith, we become like the person in Jesus' parable who buries his talent. After all, boats are safe in the harbour, but that is not what they are made for.

Real transformative growth can happen when we have to deal with what is other, foreign, different. In both the Jewish and the Christian scriptures, God's message comes in surprising ways - through the stranger, the foreigner, from the one who is different from us, often from a source from which we would never expect to hear God's voice. Abraham was called to take his family and go into the unknown, into foreign territory. Elijah ran away rather than answering the call to be a prophet. Think of the Samaritan woman, the Gerasene man possessed by demons, the tax collectors and those others despised by society at that time, the Roman centurion who even surprised Jesus. It was Paul who spent much of his life persecuting Christians who told Cornelius and his household "The truth I have now come to realise is that God does not have favourites, but that anybody of any nationality who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him (Acts 10:34). Jesus told stories like the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan to make us think outside the square - to help us to stop making God into our own image and likeness, expecting God to act as we think God should! And Jesus reminded us that "if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than anyone else? (Mt 5: 46)

In one of the daily newspapers, the following appeared:

As a cartoonist and an atheist, I hope kids around the world will put down their Bibles and Korans or whatever else their parents force them to look at and pick up a comic instead.

Now that's insulting.

Parents want to do what is best for their children. That's why we 'force' them to go to school, for example and it's why we try to equip them for life in whatever way we can, sometimes even when they don't want to do what we ask of them! If parents are people of faith, if they see belief in God as something that is enriching and transformative, something that calls their children to deeper commitments to each other and the world in which they live, then surely they have a duty to help their children come to grips with that, to appreciate that.

But leaving such a silly attitude as this correspondent's aside, and he or she is not alone, what does that do for dialogue, for mutual understanding, for co-operation, for peace and harmony?

Not a lot, I suggest.

Regards
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