

Others

I recently watched the debate between arch atheist Richard Dawkins and believing Oxford mathematician John Lennox and found myself alienated from both. And it struck me once again with satisfaction and self-validation, how I do not fit in anywhere completely. Sadly, there are others who turn this into a problem.

In the case of Dawkins it was not his critique of religion that disturbed me, for I almost entirely agree with him about the amount of evil religions have caused, the endemic inhumanity of religious power, and the irrational way so many try to justify the unjustifiable or prove the unprovable. It is just the absence of any spirituality, his materialist certainty, that overrides almost all other considerations.

And whereas I agreed with some of Lennox's critique of Dawkins, when he came to describing his own religious faith, I simply could not understand a literal Christian narrative. I have no doubt that both men would probably say exactly the same about my religious position.

If this true between other belief systems, it is even truer within each religion and ideology. And it has infected science too. Just look at the anger and devious massaging of statistics between rival scientists on the issue of global warming and the recent case in the Climatic Research Unit at the University of East Anglia where agenda overruled the facts.

Look how impossible we humans are, so convinced we are right and everyone else is wrong, and how easy it is to disengage, despise and hate each other. Humans are just programmed to protect their patches, physical and intellectual, against the outsider, and that is how they think they can survive the challenges of life!

After the shootings at Fort Hood, Texas, by a Muslim army major, one response was to ignore any Islamic fanaticism, arguing that there are all too many nutcases of all religions and backgrounds wielding guns in the US. And the easy availability of guns in America simply gives more crazies more opportunities to do evil things. And the army was right to ignore all the signs of Islamic anger because it needs Muslim soldiers and diversity.

The other side argues that so many violent acts have been carried out by angry Muslims that it would be crazy not to be suspicious, and the way the army ignored all the signs of radicalism was not just willful neglect but criminal. Some go further and claim that there is something in contemporary Muslim minds and societies, if not in Islam itself, that encourages violence.

Homosexuality is now a ubiquitous presence in Western societies. Yet public opinion is still as polarized as ever. In Europe it is not politically correct to express reservations. In the US it is. Yet both narratives are discussed and debated. Sadly, in both cases there are sick individuals who physically assault those with whom they disagree.

When differences of opinion turn into hatred and deafness then of course it leads to disaster.

Although it is argued that popular culture dumbs everyone down to a mindless banality, our modern societies are so disparate, so much more mixed with conflicting cultures and ideas than ever before. How can we expect any kind of unanimity? The trouble is that politics, sensationalism and the need to make money have created a climate in which the media from top to bottom is dominated by attack, confrontation, and demolition rather than genuine attempts to understand and to build bridges. I see it at work wherever I turn. Everyone seems busy protecting their own positions by rubbishing any that is different than theirs.

Most societies have evolved out of a single class structure and a dominant religion and culture. In such societies newcomers are severely disadvantaged and too often alienated. But in a few societies, as in the USA, the damage is neutralized because no one position dominates to the exclusion of others.

I do not claim that Americans are more tolerant than anyone else. But I do believe minorities are better protected in the USA and are better able to thrive and assert their own positions than in Europe and most other parts of the world. And that has to do with the culture of the society rather than the behaviour of individuals. In Europe a centralized national culture invariably leads to a dominant media position and it is this that makes "others" feel uncomfortable, over and above individual acts of intolerance.

Most Americans just get on with living their lives, perhaps because they are not so cushioned by welfare, and nothing breeds anger, depression, and violence so much as indolence! In America if they hate, they usually hate those who threaten personally and immediately. But otherwise everyone has to work very hard to survive and almost everyone is a foreigner with a weird system of beliefs and odd practices. Perhaps New York is not typical but Hallal food stands on Sixth Avenue are not overturned. Cabs driven by turbaned Sikhs or festooned with the Koran are still taken. No one turns a head when a fully bedecked Hassid jaywalks on Fifth Avenue. We read of all the villains, the good and the bad and the ugly, but that's life, so long as Clint Eastwood wins in the ends.

I was surprised when a Muslim friend told me that many Muslims in the USA feel insecure. At first I had a hard time understanding why, because time and time again since 9/11 every American leader has emphasized, ad nauseam, that all Muslims cannot be held responsible for the acts of a few, and that America is fighting only those who attack it, and that Islam is a peaceful religion of gentle folk who would not normally say "boo" to a goose. The day after Thanksgiving was a Muslim festival officially recognized in New York (scene of the attack on the World Trade Center, of course) and all parking offences were forgiven. So what makes Muslims feel unwanted in the USA? Graffiti? Assaults? Cries of "Go Home"? Name calling? Bullying? We Jews have been putting up with that forever!

But then I felt bad because perhaps I was not being sensitive enough and perhaps in many parts of the USA the situation is very unpleasant for them.

And just because it is almost a given nowadays that Muslims hate Jews because of Israel, why should I allow the generalizations or myopia of others to cloud my mind?

It is legislation that defines a country, not whether some citizens behave badly. But I suspect that because almost the whole of the Muslim world has bought into the myth that America and Zionism are out to destroy them they actually believe that (and incredibly ignore the crude reality that it is Muslims who kill most Muslims). As a result they have created a psychological mindset that takes no notice of reality, only mythology. And chunks of the world accept this. And once again I realize how pernicious differences have become and how, supposedly civilized we think we are, in reality we are still medieval in our hatreds and heresy hunting.

Almost everyone celebrates Thanksgiving in the USA, wherever they come from, because it is simply a celebration of being privileged to live in a society with opportunities and freedoms. It doesn't mean it is perfect or without its problems or mass murderers. But it is the celebration of a haven of difference, not forced toleration. Live and let live, and let me just get on earning enough money to live. And if we don't like what we hear on one channel, or in one magazine or newspaper, we can simply switch to another. So even if you think I'm crazy (and I certainly think you are), even if you hate me, I don't give a hoot, that's your problem; just leave me alone to be me.