

How Much Should We Hate Our Enemies?

The same-sex marriage debate is about to heat up in Australia, and for both sides the temptation to embrace fear and hate will be fierce.

Most of us have enemies, even if we don't recognise it.

Most of us hate someone, or some group of people, even if we won't admit it to ourselves.

Hate doesn't have to be wild and expressive. It can begin in a cool, logical conclusion that an individual, a cause, or a person is in the wrong.

The moment we decide that someone is in the wrong, we are at risk of beginning to hate them.

I've seen from both sides of the fence that both progressives and conservatives are initially motivated by what they perceive to be good and true causes. Progressives support same-sex marriage in the first instance because they believe that societal affirmation of homosexuality will relieve stigma and prejudice.

Conservatives support traditional marriage in the first instance because they believe it is both a societal and personal good with a unique character that needs to be preserved and clarified.

But identifying the good and the true immediately reveals the false and the evil (in the theological sense of deprivation of the good).

For progressives, opposition to same-sex marriage both expresses and preserves prejudice and stigma, and is hence evil.

For conservatives, same-sex marriage redefines marriage and further obscures the unique characteristics of the traditional institution, and is hence evil.

The mind of the enemy

Still hoping to keep things cool and intellectual, we naturally attempt to explain to our own satisfaction why some people promote these evil positions.

Both sides of the debate can tell themselves that the opposition is simply ignorant: conservatives don't know enough gay people, and progressives don't understand the long-term implications of obscuring traditional marriage.

Both sides can claim that this is exacerbated by the opponent's pre-existing convictions: conservatives tend to adhere to unshakable religious convictions, while progressives are blinkered by their ideology of progress, human nature as a blank-slate, and so on.

But over time it becomes more and more difficult to excuse ignorance. We all naturally give more credit to the "obvious" truth of our own beliefs and reasoning, and we expect that "truth will out" sooner or later.

Repeated encounters with our opponents and their views lead us to suspect that there is more to the story than mere ignorance. Surely, after hearing my carefully reasoned beliefs on numerous occasions, a merely ignorant person would have changed their mind by now?

We begin to suspect that our opponents are either not sufficiently motivated or intellectually honest to face the truth of our arguments sincerely. We begin to suspect not only ignorance, but *wilful* ignorance, lack of sincerity, and either gross stupidity or actual malice.

Before too long we arrive at the conclusion that the

opposition must be fuelled by a core of supporters who are either too stupid to see that their cause is evil, or else they see it but embrace it for that very reason.

By this stage, progressives are firmly convinced that a cabal of religious conservatives wish to actively persecute homosexual people out of deep-seated hatred for them, informed by some kind of despotic religious impulse.

Conservatives are equally convinced that a cabal of homosexual activists are intent on destroying Christianity and the family, as part of a perverse, radically dehumanising and self-centred ideology.

In other words, your opponents aren't evil by accident or mistake. They aren't well-meaning yet misguided people. They are in fact what's wrong with the world, and they are intractably ready to undermine all your efforts, corrupt everything noble and good, and ruin everything for everyone.

They are the enemy, and we hate them.

The enemy in your own mind

Christians are exhorted to love their enemies. This is hard to reconcile with the kind of hatred that the culture wars inspire.

"Love the sinner, hate the sin" has become ubiquitous, but it's not clear that it actually provides a solution in this context.

The problem is that there's a big difference between a personal encounter with someone who acts and talks in hateful ways, versus our largely imaginary notion of the enemy who exists *out there* thwarting us and taunting us out of malice.

Imaginary doesn't mean such people don't really exist. No, it's entirely possible that such people are out there in the world, trying to make things worse for everyone by destroying

everything you hold dear.

But an actual encounter with a malicious person or even an ignorant person or a hostile one is completely different from what happens to us when we *imagine* our impersonal, nebulous enemy and infer that they must be acting out of malice.

You can't love your mental simulation of an enemy.

Loving your enemy is a response to real people in real encounters. It's not possible to love an imaginary model of malice in human form.

I don't know my enemy

Perhaps an antidote to this hatred in us is to recognise when we do not know our enemy.

You might see snippets of people on TV saying things that are completely false, or a misrepresentation, or misleading. But unless you actually *know* the person, whatever inner motive or intention you ascribe to them exists primarily (and perhaps *only*) in your own mind.

Without this distinction, we end up *presuming* that our opponents must be motivated by malice or prejudice, and listen to them just long enough to confirm our suspicions, to put them in the appropriate box.

The frightening thing about this imaginary malice and corresponding hatred is that we are the ones who create it in our own minds. Absent a real encounter with an actual person, we ourselves are creating and populating an inner world where malicious, hateful enemies dominate.

I am my enemy

The issues that divide us do exist, and we may need or want to be involved in shaping society, politics, and culture for the better.

But these issues are distinct from the question of what occupies our minds and our hearts.

St Paul exhorts us:

“Do not worry about anything...and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds.”

Not only should we not worry, but we should actively turn our attention to good rather than evil:

“whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

Yet in practice we give more power to our imaginary enemies – enemies we will never meet, who exist only in our minds as objects of hate and fear, and representatives of malice.

Do malicious people exist as we imagine them? Probably. But imagining malicious enemies is an entirely different activity from actually facing them.

If you ever face a malicious enemy you will want as much peace and love in you as possible, and pray to come away unscathed. But the malicious enemies that exist in our own minds are a persistent illusion, one that eats away at whatever peace and love we currently enjoy.

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