

Why do Christians disagree?

David Atkinson (Assistant Bishop in the Diocese of Southwark)

‘I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to agree in the Lord.’ St Paul seems to have a lot to say about Christians agreeing. In the letter to the Philippian church where Euodia and Syntyche belong, he writes of ‘standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the Gospel.’ And in the Letter to the Ephesians there is a calling to make every effort ‘to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’, as there is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.’ The varieties of gifts given to the churches are provided in the context of that call to unity, and the expectation that the body of Christ will ‘work properly’, promoting growth and building itself up in love.

So why do Christians disagree? On the legitimacy of divorce and right of remarriage, on abortion, on just war or pacifism, on usury, on contraception, on genetic engineering, on sexuality, on economic priorities, on response to climate change - to name just a few moral and political questions, not to mention doctrines of church, ministry, mission and eschatology.

At one level, of course, disagreements can arise simply because people have different experiences of life and come into contact with different facts about the world which can confront assumptions, challenge previously held views, or harden attitudes. For example, we could think of a woman who senses a call from God into the ordained ministry of the Church. She belongs to a church congregation that has always taken the view that the ordination of women is contrary to Scripture or tradition or to good ecumenical relationships. ‘However’, says someone in that congregation, ‘though I have always been against the ordination of women, because it is you I’m willing to change my mind.’ Or to give another example, we could think of a Christian man who has, for social and theological reasons, always been opposed to homosexual relationships but who gets to know a loving gay couple whose lives display the fruits of God’s Spirit, and who then finds himself forced by that fact to revisit his understanding Scripture or his inherited attitudes to gay people. Sometimes hard facts of experience compel a change of attitude or change of mind.

There is no such thing as uninterpreted experience, and there are other factors that can influence our understanding of ourselves and our interpretation of the facts of our experiences. Some of these other factors give us different ways into the question: why do Christians disagree? Here are five.

1. Because they look to different sources of authority.

Anglicans, in particular, frequently refer back to the C16th churchman Richard Hooker. He it was who first spoke of what has been called a triad of ‘scripture’, ‘reason’ and ‘tradition’. The classic reference comes in *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity: The Fifth Book*, VIII.2.

‘Be it in matter of the one kind or the other, what *Scripture* doth plainly deliver, to that the first place both of credit and obedience is due; the next whereunto is whatsoever any man can necessarily conclude by *force of reason*; after these the *voice of the Church* succeedeth. That which the Church by her ecclesiastical authority shall probably think and define to be true or good, must in congruity with reason overrule all other inferior judgements whatsoever.’ [my emphasis].

In another place, speaking of God’s Wisdom, Hooker writes:

“Some things she openeth by the sacred books of Scripture; some things by the glorious works of Nature: with some things she inspireth them from above by spiritual influence; in somethings she leadeth and traineth them only by worldly experience and practice. We may not so in any one special kind admire her, that we disgrace her in any other; but let all her ways be according unto their place and degree adored.” (*Laws*. II. i. 4).

There can be coherence in all three sources of authority, Scripture, Tradition and Reason, if the triad is held together by a doctrine of the living Word or Wisdom of God, by the Holy Spirit. But without that living centre, Scripture, if pushed too far without reference to the living Word, become literalistic and fundamentalist. Tradition, if pushed too far without reference to the living Word, becomes a dry and ritualistic formalism. Reason, if pushed too far without reference to the living Word, leads to a loss of any clear Christian identity.

The interplay of these three sources of authority was given modern expression in the Report *Growing Into Union* (1971), written by two Evangelical Anglican and two Anglo-Catholic scholars. They related Scripture and Tradition in this way:

‘Jesus Christ is the full and final revelation of God; in him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily and he alone is the Saviour of mankind. Nevertheless there can be and is development in the Church’s understanding of the Gospel, and it is a legitimate criticism of a great deal of post-Reformation theology, both Catholic and Protestant, that it has tended to interpret both the Scriptures and other documents of the Church in a very wooden way without reference to their history and context. Not only did this tendency prevent the recovery of a dynamic view of Tradition as essentially the process of the handing on by the Church of the faith of the Scriptures; it also enthroned the static view, which first reduced tradition to a series of traditions, and then represented these as units of divine truth having their status independent of the Bible.....

The ground of both Scripture and Tradition, the reality to which both point, is the fact of divine Revelation given fully and finally in and through Jesus Christ, who is both the Word and the Wisdom of the Father, and who, by his crucifixion and resurrection has redeemed the human race....

The fact that God’s full and final revelation is given in a person is of the utmost significance... because we who are to be redeemed are persons, God has revealed himself to us in a person and as a person, and both his acts and his words ultimately derive from this....

Tradition, however venerable, is not infallible as a mode of transmission, and needs constantly to be tested by the Scriptures whose witness to Christ it seeks to convey. Scripture, however inspired, was not meant to be self-sufficient as a means of instruction and life, but to operate within the common life of the Christian community by way of preaching, sacrament, fellowship and prayers.'

Sometimes Christians disagree because they have different starting points in their thinking, rooted in different sources of authority, or because of a 'wooden' use of them, detached from the *personal* self-revelation of God.

To take one contemporary cause of Christian disagreement, same-sex relationships: to rely only on *Biblical texts* which seem to mention same-sex relationships, (and on the assumption that what the texts refer to is what we today refer to), one would conclude that Christians must be against all forms of same-sex relating. The *Christian tradition* would agree with this if we are referring to certain physical same-sex behaviour, but many would point to significant examples of non-genital homoerotic relationships - read Anselm on 'friendship' for example. However, to use *Christian reason* detached from either Scripture or tradition might lead to the view that contemporary understanding of human sexuality is very different from that which guided the authors of the Bible or Christians of past centuries, and that we are free to decide for ourselves what makes for example, for neighbour love, justice and equality.

2. Because they draw on different guiding metaphors for God.

Another source of disagreement between Christians can be the ways they 'do' theology. Sallie McFague's *Metaphorical Theology* illustrates the variety of ways in which different metaphors for God can lead to different ways of doing theology. The guiding metaphors that we choose to use for God, dictate the shape of the moral questions we ask and the pastoral responses we may make.

To return to the question of same-sex relationships, for example, to begin with God as 'Creator, Lawgiver, Judge' could lead to the conversation being set up in terms of a morality and pastoral practice of rules, of sin and the call to repentance. Some might describe this in terms of search for what is 'right'.

To begin with Christ as Saviour could lead to a morality based on the development of virtues rooted in grace, forgiveness and resurrection. The pastoral responses might speak in terms of leaving the past behind and the freedom of a fresh start. Some might speak of a search for what is 'good'.

By contrast, to begin with an understanding of The Holy Spirit as Love, even as Lover, could lead to a situational morality, celebrating the rich diversity of human life and sexuality. We might engage in a search for what is 'authentic'.

Of course we should want to say that God can be thought of as Creator, Lawgiver, Judge, Saviour, Lover and many other metaphors. The point is that our starting point is likely to shape how we see the moral question and the pastoral options that are open to us.

3. Because they look to different social and cultural sources for morality.

An exploration of contemporary social psychology, in Jonathan Haidt's book *The Righteous Mind*, suggests that there are six primary foundations for morality. Haidt identifies these as

- (i) care / harm
- (ii) liberty / oppression
- (iii) fairness /cheating
- (iv) loyalty / betrayal
- (v) authority / subversion
- (vi) sanctity / degradation.

(As an aside, it is intriguing to note how closely these relate in different ways to the Decalogue. Thus; 'God who brought you out of Egypt' resonates with the liberty/oppression theme; 'No other gods; do not take God's name in vain' takes us into purity and danger, sanctity and degradation. "Keep the Sabbath Day holy" is partly about sanctity and partly about care for others. 'Honour father and mother' resonates with respect for authority/ submission. 'Thou shalt not kill' is about respect for human life: care and harm. 'Thou shalt not commit adultery' refers to respect for faithfulness, loyalty and betrayal. 'Thou shalt not steal; Thou shalt not bear false witness' are about fairness and cheating. 'Thou shalt not covet' is about loving enough not to be envious, about care, compassion/harm.)

Haidt's argument (for a predominantly American readership) is that

- (a) (American political) liberals tend to major on care/ harm, liberty / oppression and to some degree on fairness/ cheating; their most sacred value is 'care for victims of oppression';
- (b) libertarians tend to major on liberty/ oppression and to some smaller degree on fairness / cheating; their most sacred value is 'individual liberty';
- (c) conservatives tend to depend on all six foundations; their most sacred value is 'preserve the institutions and traditions that sustain a moral community'.

Why a person chooses to be a liberal, libertarian or conservative is, Haidt argues, something to do with genetics and nurture. I would want to add that I think it is also to do with the values to which we aspire. Anthony Storr, for example, in *The Integrity of the Personality*, argued that 'It is clear that it is as legitimate to ask towards what end a process is directed, as to inquire from what cause it originated, and I believe that any psychological description of human beings must attempt to answer both questions.'

Many factors thus may contribute to our choice of source for our understanding of morality. Among these might be the personality differences noted by Carl Jung, and by the Myers-Briggs work on temperament types. Another factor might be the extent to which different people - indeed different cultures - prioritise the two hemispheres of the brain in providing two different 'takes' on the world. As Iain McGilchrist has demonstrated in *The Master and His Emissary*, the left-brain 'take' is more analytical, focussed and linear whereas the right brain tends to operate with a more holistic gestalt, open to new undefined horizons. His example of the sparrow makes the point. It concentrates on pecking seed (left brain activity), but every now

and then looks up to take in the wider world and check for safety (right brain). Both, of course, are needed, but our Western culture - McGilchrist argues - has become dominated by left-brain analytical 'pecking' to the detriment of more holistic, open and creative ways of thinking.

With reference once again to our example: the question of same-sex relationships. There are Christians who believe that our primary task is an analytical, exegetical 'pecking' of biblical texts, to discern God's Word; others believe that a broader based biblical theology of sexuality, relationships, commitment and the call to holiness provides the proper context in which such texts may be responsibly understood.

4. Because there are different ways of being religious.

Emerging out of the interplay of personality differences and social and cultural factors, there are different ways of being religious in today's culture. William James' classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, (recently revisited by Charles Taylor in *Varieties of Religion Today*), set the agenda for much subsequent psychology of religion. One major piece of work by Batson and Ventis *The Religious Experience*, working from a social psychology perspective identified three main 'orientations' in being religious. They call these 'means', 'end' and 'quest'. Thus religious experience may be

- (i) extrinsic: an individual uses their religion as a means to serve other ends e.g. social status, to earn a place in God's kingdom etc.
- (ii) intrinsic: an individual 'lives' their religion as an end in itself, and it carries over into other aspects of their life.
- (iii) quest: an open-ended approach to existential questions.

How a person is religious is likely to contribute to their preferences for sources of authority in decision making, for the guiding metaphors which shape their reasoning, for their sources of morality, and their 'take' on the world. The psychology of religion may have a great deal to say about why Christians disagree.

5. Because of a different approach to basic philosophy

Underneath all the above discussion, however, there is an even deeper cultural factor in some disagreement between Christians. In her book *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, Nancey Murphy argues that much contemporary theology is affected much more than it realises by modern philosophy (from Descartes onwards). Contemporary philosophy has moved on from 'modern' to 'post-modern', she argues, and Christian theology could benefit considerably from the changes that have taken place in three aspects of contemporary philosophical thought. She discusses religious language (is it referential or expressivist?), and different ways of construing God's action in the world (interventionist or immanent?), but her primary point concerns epistemology, the theory of knowledge.

Whereas ‘modern’ philosophy is largely ‘foundationalist’, that is it seeks a universal knowledge based on some indubitable foundation, (Descartes spoke of knowledge as built on a foundation rather as bricks are built into a wall), post-modern philosophy of the past few decades has rejected foundationalism in favour of an organic, network approach to truth - a truth of coherence and correspondence.

However, Murphy argues, theology has tended to remain with a ‘foundationalist’ approach, seeking an indubitable foundation either in Scripture (conservatives) or in reason (liberals). This is the cause of some differences between Christians: they start from different ‘foundations’ for knowledge. She proposes that Christian theology needs to move away from foundationalism and towards a ‘network’ approach to knowledge. Her primary point is to remind theology of its sometimes-unacknowledged debt to philosophical assumptions.

Conclusion

We do not know why Euodia and Syntyche were in disagreement. Did they look to different sources of authority? Did they think differently about God? Were they influenced in their choices differently by genetic make up or environmental factors? Did they have a different vision leading to different values? Did they express their faith in different ways? We, of course, do not know. We can assume from what St Paul says that their disagreement was destructive of fellowship in some way. But not all difference is destructive. Indeed, the very texts that celebrate our Christian unity in Christ (one Lord, one faith, one baptism), are those which refer to the variety of gifts within the Body of Christ, and the differences between different members in that body. The unity for which St Paul prays is not a uniformity of view, or an identity of ministry, but a personal unity, by baptism into the one Lord.

Richard Hooker wrote before there was any concept of ‘foundationalism’. And though he does refer to a ‘foundation’ (namely Jesus Christ), he does so in a way which is not far from the organic, living metaphor of which non-foundationalists speak, when they talk of truth emerging in the coherences, as part of a story, part of an on-going narrative. He operates with what we today might call a ‘Gospel hermeneutic’. Thus referring to St Paul, he says:

“And as his words concerning the books of ancient Scripture do not take place but with the presupposal of the Gospel of Christ embraced; so our own words also, when we extol the complete sufficiency of the whole entire body of the Scripture, must in like sort be understood with this caution, that the benefit of nature’s light be not thought excluded as unnecessary, because the necessity of a diviner light is magnified.” (*Laws*. I xiv.4).

When Hooker refers to Scripture as ‘foundational’, he makes clear what he means:

‘If the foundation of faith do import the general ground whereupon we rest when we do believe, the writings of the Evangelists and the Apostles are the foundation of Christian faith...’;

but then he immediately adds:

‘But if the name Foundation do note the principal thing which is believed, then is that the foundation of our faith which St Paul hath unto Timothy: God manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit... This is Christ the Saviour of the world.’ (*Learned Discourse of Justification*, 15-16).

In other words, the foundation of Christian faith is the living Triune God, the incarnate Saviour, the justifying Spirit. As the authors of *Growing Into Union* said, God’s self-revelation is personal. In other words, truth is ultimately personal. Our knowledge therefore, (as Michael Polanyi has put it), is *personal* knowledge.

According to Polanyi, referring to the practice of science, personal knowledge emerges within a community of conviviality as a commitment of faith, based on sufficient evidence, is tested out, seeking reality to reveal itself to our explorings; it is corrigible and open to change; it is also open to being called in question, and to discovering hitherto undreamed of possibilities.

This is not far from the ‘critical realism’ advocated by Tom Wright for reading biblical texts:

‘This is a way of describing the process of ‘knowing’ that acknowledges *the reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower* (hence ‘realism’), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiralling path of *appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known* (hence ‘critical’). This path leads to critical reflection on the products of our enquiry into ‘reality’, so that our assertions about ‘reality’ acknowledge their own provisionality. Knowledge, in other words, although in principle concerning realities independent of the knower, is never itself independent of the knower’ [except for the special and highly complex case of self-knowledge.] (*The New Testament and the People of God*, p. 35).

In his discussion of moral enquiry, Alasdair MacIntyre demonstrates that all interpretation of texts involves the discovery that the text also interprets the reader. We need to come to the text with what he calls a ‘tradition of moral enquiry’, that is certain attitudes and dispositions that we bring to the text for them and for ourselves to be called in question.

Between them ‘critical realism’ and a ‘tradition of moral enquiry’ offer a fresh (and non-foundational) way of looking at the engagement between Scripture, Tradition and Reason, and indeed the various other factors which we have outlined that may contribute to Christian disagreement. To adapt Polanyi: God’s self-revelation takes place within a community of faith and worship, through our personal dialogue and conversation with the narrative of Scripture, as the Holy Spirit interprets it to us, and interprets us in its light. We come to it within a tradition of interpretation, but ready to have this and ourselves called in question by God’s self-disclosure. This is a process through which faith matures in the journey of healing and salvation. Our knowledge is always corrigible and provisional, but none the less dependent on the reality of the living God.

Tom Wright's own conclusion is worth quoting in some detail:

Knowledge has to do with the interrelation of humans and the created world. This brings it within the sphere of the biblical belief that humans are made in the image of the creator, and that in consequence they are entrusted with the task of exercising wise responsibility within the created order. They are neither detached observers of, nor predators upon, creation. From this point of view, knowledge can be a form of stewardship; granted the present state of the world, knowledge can be a form of *redeeming* stewardship; it can be, in one sense, a form of love....To know is to be in a relation with the known, which means that the 'knower' must be open to the possibility of the 'known' being other than had been expected or even desired, and must be prepared to respond accordingly, not merely to observe from a distance.' (*New Testament and the People of God*, p. 45).

An epistemology, a hermeneutic, of love? I think St Paul might agree with that.

3600 words