

From Job to Cancel Culture: Our Divisions, the Reasons, the Cure

"Don't condemn me for my lifestyle; I'm just doing what the French do, and fifty million Frenchmen can't be wrong."
Sophie Tucker 1927

The dictionary tells us that orthodoxy simply means "holding opinions or beliefs which are generally or traditionally accepted as correct, or which are in accordance with some recognized standard." For the orthodox, the word carries a connotation of virtue, even divine approval. For the more unconventional, "orthodoxy" suggests a stuffy self-satisfaction that needs to be discredited in the name of freedom.

This tension between orthodoxy and freedom has been around for a long time. A familiar early example is the story of Job in the Old Testament. Job, a truly good man, was God's favorite—so much so that God bragged about his devotion. Satan responded with a request to test Job by taking away his many blessings to see if he would remain faithful to God. After two rounds of testing, Job—now covered with boils—is sitting on an ash heap in a garbage dump having lost his health, his family, and his wealth.

Job did not know about the Satanic test that God approved, and Job is fuming at the injustice of his fate. His central question is why me? Why am I suffering? Three friends who come to sit with him give him one of the most orthodox answers ever: You are suffering as punishment for your sins.

Their answer is based on a covenant that God made with Abraham in the Book of Genesis. Obey me and I will protect you and your myriad descendants, and they will thrive in a land of milk and honey. Disobey me, and they will suffer. This contract is a recurrent presence throughout the Old Testament from Genesis through Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, where it became codified law, and still on to the prophets whose writings end the Old Testament. This covenant is the essence of retribution theology, which might be summed up: "Those who are obedient to God are called righteous and will be blessed, while those who are disobedient are wicked and will be cursed." This is the fundamental theology of the fundamentalists. It has been a bedrock belief for many for thousands of years. It is orthodoxy in its highest and purest form.

The only problem is that in the Book of Job, it is dead wrong. Job has committed no sins. He was God's darling. His suffering comes because of Satan's tests, which are made with God's permission. There is no doubt about it, no fancy interpretation. It is a fact that is given when the story of Job begins. More importantly, at the end of the Book of Job God says that the friends were wrong in their explanation of Job's suffering. And when further pressed for justice by Job, God replies that He is not bound by human notions of justice and that humans are not capable of understanding Him. God then restores to Job all that he has lost and more.

So, we come away from Job's story clearly understanding that what is orthodox—no matter how great its credentials or claims—is not necessarily the will of God. Orthodox opinions or beliefs are only those generally or traditionally accepted as correct. They are not necessarily correct, and their claims of divine blessing are not automatically valid.

But God does not endorse Job's rebellion against orthodoxy either. Job is reminded that he cannot know what justice is—at least to God. God's neutrality and His final reward of Job here serve as reminders that our salvation does not depend upon our arguments.

Despite the warnings in Job that neither orthodoxy nor rebellion has a claim to certain truth and that maintaining these positions may matter little in the end, the struggle between them has persisted until now. It seems to have grown because—as a deeply divided nation—we have two orthodoxies and two resistances against them. One side finds orthodoxy in the traditions of the past; the other, in the promise of the future. The resistance to traditionalist orthodoxy presents itself as a struggle against stifling, ignorant, and evil rigidity. The resistance to progressive orthodoxy shuns dangerous, self-righteous elitism and the abandonment of tried values. What in Job's time might have been described as a two-dimensional argument has become three-dimensional. Imagine two pyramids, one right-side-up and one upside-down, joined base-to-base. Their points and corners represent orthodoxies, counter-orthodoxies, and counter-counter orthodoxies. Let's just say there are a lot of competing ideas—a tangled jumble of controversy. And what began as religious differences is now a stew of religion, politics, and heated cultural debate. It is a long way from what John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, once called "Gracious Orthodoxy."

Let's set aside political correctness, cancel culture, racism, critical race theory, wokeness, white nationalism, the war on women, pro-life, pro-choice, MAGA, antivax, Black Lives matter, QAnon and all the other catchphrases and movements that constitute our divisions. Let's focus on how those on one side look at those on the other and wonder how they can possibly think what they think or believe what they believe. Surely, they can't. They must be trying to fool others for dark and terrible reasons. Put another way, how can we possibly see things so differently from each other? The answer is that we are different, and so we perceive things differently.

The social sciences tell us that we do not all see through the same eyes. Look, for instance, at all the psychological typologies that have been developed and used in our society. They describe different types of people, each with their own point of view. We have the nine types of the enneagram, the sixteen types of the Myers-Briggs personality test, the four domains and thirty-four talents of the CliftonStrengths assessment, and there are many others.

Let's look briefly at one of these types. According to Carl Jung, we either see the outer world as a reflection of our inner life or our inner life as a reflection of the outer world. That alone must mean great differences in perception. Add to it, the idea that some of us are more intuitive and others more data-oriented, that some are more rational and others more values-driven, and that some are more spontaneous and others more organized. Put all these possibilities into the mix in varying amounts, and you can see the wide range of individual perceptions that can be predicted by just the Myers-Briggs categories.

Pundit David Brooks argues that we create the reality we see with the expectations we bring to it. That is, we see mostly what we expect to see. Have we not all failed to find something right before our eyes because it was not the shape or color or size we expected? Think too, about all the tests that have proven how selective and distorted our memories are—and distorted memories easily lead to skewed beliefs. I

don't have time to build the complete case that each of us has her or his unique view of reality based on past experiences, expectations, values, and desires. But our perceptions of reality are as diverse as we are, and that is why we see things differently.

Still, the current state of conflict among arguing factions does not rest solely on varied perceptions of reality. There are some pretty strong feelings involved. These come from a different trait of humanity. We are social creatures. We need each other, and we also need to belong to something greater than ourselves.

For centuries these needs to belong and to be understood were satisfied in places of worship, in family interactions, with friends, at work, through education, and during leisure. Somewhere along the line all of this started to unravel. We now scatter family members to distant places. Only the gray go to churches. We flit from job to job. Our colleges no longer try to make us better and more insightful humans but are reduced to vocational training. We sit glued to our electronic screens, ignoring each other. As a result, many of us have become troubled—feeling misunderstood, isolated, and needy.

According to David Brooks, we have found a false cure for our emptiness: politics. Politics has proven a terrible substitute for all the other ways we used to reach out to one another because of the intense and corrosive arguments and the mutual disdain it has fostered. We are closer to those in our tribe, but we hate so many others. We are like the people building the Tower of Babel in the Book of Genesis who could no longer “understand each other’s speech.”

I ask each of us to find new ways to connect with others, to set politics aside as a tool that it was not meant to be, and to try to “understand each other’s speech.” The answer to our divisions must be in learning how to listen to each other, and in developing an ability to see and appreciate the divinity that lives in each of us. We need to relearn how to be compassionate, empathetic, and forgiving.

Jesus is quoted as saying, “But I say to you who are willing to hear: Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you.” We must become those “who are willing to hear,” those who choose to live by the golden rule. It is not some impossible religious ideal; it is the way—perhaps the only way—we can survive and even thrive as human beings. It is gracious orthodoxy—the blend of belief, freedom, and forgiveness without antagonism or fear of others or their way of seeing things.

But it will not be an easy thing to do. Perhaps the best way to begin is one small step at a time. To help with that I have ten suggestions offered by Anna Grace Taylor:

1. Love is the answer. Always
2. Vulnerability is not a weakness. It is a strength.
3. Your body is sacred. Cherish it.
4. Gratitude shifts everything. Be thankful
5. Forgiveness sets you free. It really does.
6. You cannot change others. Only yourself.
7. Little acts of kindness are never little. Ever.
8. Fun is underrated. Enjoy yourself.
9. Age is just a number. It's never too late.
10. Life is precious. Live it now. Don't waste it.