Polarisation

Hope for Europe 26-10-07

I will start off with an example from my own family:
For 17 years my brother, who is married to an American, lived and worked
in San Francisco.
During that period they experienced quite a shocking development:

- The number of homeless in the city exploded, and at the end of the period accounted for ≈ 2 per cent of the population.
  This – same time – decrease in other areas.
- The streets in downtown SF were populated by drug addicts and mentally ill in makeshift tents, while drugs were openly sold and injected.
  Needles in the sand.
- Every year saw ≈ 20,000 complaints to the police about faeces on the streets, and in 2020 as many as 712 people died of drug overdoses,
  this in a city of less than a million inhabitants.
- At the same time, influential left-wing organisations consistently protested against proposals to end the misery.
  Pressuring someone into detoxification,
  or resorting to forced treatment of the mentally ill,
  was by many described as state-sanctioned abuse.
- Parallel to this, and especially in connection with the Black Lives Matter protests (where one of the most widespread slogans was *Defund the Police*)
  the city made dramatic cuts to their police budgets.
  In San Francisco the cuts totalled $120 million in 2021.
  It was also decided that shoplifting at a value of less than $1000 would pass without legal consequences.
- Not surprisingly, my brother and his family who lived in Oakland, saw a rapid rise both in violence and burglaries in their area.
- But that was not all. They also found that the lgbtq agenda was pushed harder and harder in their children's schools.
  This continued, despite them talking about it with the headmaster.
- One of the tipping points for themselves came when they sent their 9 year old boy to a sports camp in their municipality.
  The camp started with a round where the children had to answer
  two questions: 1) what gender they would normally fall in love with
  and 2) what pronoun they wanted their leaders to use.
  On a sports camp for 9 year olds.

Consequently, they could not with good conscience keep their children in the public schools of the city. And since schooling in Sweden is free, they simply moved back to the country of my brother's origin.
And yes, they both changed from being solid Democrats
to sympathizing with the Republicans.

But I'm not sharing this story to vouch for Donald Trump.
I just want to illustate one of the most obvious aspects of polarisation:
Opposing opinions strengthen one another.
When one side is radicalized, in this case the liberal left,
the other side is likely to grow.
And the prize is always paid by the middle ground positions.
This is true of America, where the culture war is both bitter and fierce.
But it is also true of Europe. It is *very* true about today's Germany.
And it is true of South America, where corrupt and/or oppressive politics
has been executed by both leftwing and rightwing parties,
making political elections almost like a game of table tennis: from one extreme to the other.

Looking at Europe, polarisation has also been triggered by a widespread sense
that media rarely covers all relevant perspectives with equal interest.
Hardly any Swedish media has, for instance,
covered the development in San Francisco.
And today, 3 years after the massacre of jews in the southern part of Israel
by Hamas, many of us would also say that the coverage of the war
between Israel and Hamas was done in a less than satisfactory way.
But we could take many different examples.

And this phenomenon not only hurts the trust in public or state media.
It is also the seedbed of all kinds of conspiracy theories,
especially if people feel their fears are not taken seriously,
giving even *more* wood for the flame of polarisation.
The worst possible fruit is when people become fact resistant,
i.e. when they have lost so much of their confidence in the media outlets
that challenge their own position that they simply switch off.

Today this phenomenon is fuelled not least by social media,
as the algorithms tend to push us in a more narrow direction.
We talk about filter bubbles, where we are trapped in a social network,
and in reality a whole worldview, that confirms us in our already held positions.

Another aspect of this has to do with identity politics.
When political debate is about identity, we are often bound to be polarised.
Especially if one identity is perceived as superior,
an therefore allowed to suppress another.

- Israel vs Hamas (want to eradicate …)
- BJP in India

So, where am I heading with all this?
Not that everybody ought to have the same position on moral or political issues.
And not that we should strive for a mid position on all matters,

although I admit that this might sound attractive to many Scandinavians.

Rather, I want to say that there is a tipping point that makes polarisation destructive, and that the reason for this is often a reaction to someone else pushing their agenda or perspective to an extreme.

This can be done both from a left, right and center position, and different parts of the world (including Europe) have found themselves on different sides of such a spectrum.

So, if I should pause and reflect on this, I would say that some of the most important ways to avoid unhealthy polarisation are:

1) Striving for objectivity.
2) Rejecting false options. The alternatives may not be any of the extremes, but could often be found somewhere in between.
3) Keeping a sense of curiosity of the Other:
   Why does he/she think the way he/she does?
   What has he/she experienced that makes him/her judge the present situation in such a different way than I do?

An important issue here has to do with what is often called the culture war.

I'm not saying that there is not a spiritual battle going on, and that this can sometimes manifest itself through both culture and political debate.

I've actually written a whole book about the spiritual battle.

But the problem with over-emphasising the war metaphor, is that we start viewing our opponents as evil.

And in most cases, that is simply not true.

Democracy is abou compromise, but you can't compromise with evil …

More often than not, our different opinions and strategy have more to do with us giving different weight to different aspects of a given dilemma.

A person who has worked a lot with this is the American thinker Jonathan Haidt.

In his book *The Righteous Mind* he presents his version of what is called moral foundations theory.

Based on research Haidt suggests that there are six moral foundations that we use when we are faced with a moral or political dilemma.

These are:

- **Care:** Centered on empathy and sensitivity to suffering, driving us to protect others from harm.
- **Fairness:** Concerns about justice, equality, reciprocity, and the punishment of those who cheat.

- **Liberty:** Highlights the importance of individual freedom and resistance to domination by others.
- **Loyalty:** Emphasizes group allegiance, patriotism, and loyalty to one's in-group.
- **Authority:** Focuses on respect for tradition, social hierarchy, leadership, and legitimate authority.
- **Sanctity:** Relates to feelings of purity, disgust, and the sacred, influencing judgments about taboos.

Polarisation often comes from us emphasizing different moral foundations, thereby
ending up in different conclusions about what is true,
right or important.

As Christians, we have a special calling in this kind of environment:
1) Keep our curiosity and willingness to listen to different perspectives.
This is actually a direct consequence of our belief in truth.
Truthseeking always involves exploration, not just buying in to
a given narrative just because the majority does so.
2) Not get stuck in the culture war rhetoric in such a way that we start viewing people
our enemies. Most people, event those we disagree with, mean well.
But some are misinformed.
And behind some ideologies, there are also spiritual enemies.
Even if we support Israel against Hamas,
we have a calling to love and pray also for the Palestinians.
3) Not adapt the frontlines of another context without reflection.
As Europeans, we don't get to vote in the US elections, and therefore we don't always have to take sides in the Democrat–Republican debate.
4) If possible, be persons of peace.
While all claims are not equally true, we should never use foul
or demeaning language about our opponents
When we disagree, we should speak with integrity and sound arguments,
rather than ad hominen rhetoric.