

The Death of EDI – And the Return of the Pharisee

The Chaplain

So- equality, diversity and inclusivity! Let me begin with a sociological term that sounds dry, but explains more about modern politics than most pundits ever will: deviance labelling. Coined by sociologists in the 1960s, this concept refers to the social process by which individuals or groups are labelled “deviant” simply because they fail to conform to dominant cultural norms. It is not the act itself, but the reaction to the act, that defines deviance.

1. Moral entrepreneurs determine what is morally acceptable. 2. These norms draw sharp boundaries: insiders vs outsiders. 3. Deviants are “othered”—stigmatized and morally condemned. 4. The label often becomes self-fulfilling, shaping identity and behaviour.

Trump’s America and the Weaponization of Deviance

Donald Trump’s political genius - however uncomfortable that phrase may sound - was to hijack deviance labelling and weaponize it for populist ends. He turned deviance labelling into a political art form.

This is the guy, after all, who labelled immigrants “rapists.” Protesters “thugs.” Journalists “enemies of the people.” Trans individuals “mentally unstable.” Muslims “dangerous.” Poor Black neighbourhoods “hellholes.” Each phrase landed with moral weight - marking groups as not merely different, but dangerous, dishonest, even demonic.

In other words, he turned the powerful machinery of deviance labelling against people who are already marginalised. His supporters were told they were the “real Americans,” the insiders, the forgotten righteous. Everyone else? Deviant and threatening. Godless and disgusting.

This was not just rhetoric. It translated into detention centres, travel bans, rollbacks of civil rights, and executive orders that targeted those already vulnerable. And, in turn, it gave license to a whole new generation of gatekeepers who didn’t fear God or care for others—only the maintenance of a narrow idea of “greatness.”

Let's be clear though, the evil political genius was not the genius of Trump – It is often said that, when Trump's actions are incomprehensible – that maybe he's implementing a strategy that is clever and complex, and will become clear in the fulness of time. Like he's playing 3d chess – and you probably know the apocryphal story, that one of his closest advisors said, 'He's not playing chess; he's eating the pieces.'

So far, so good. We all know Trump is terrible, so saying horrible things about a horrible man is not horrible. But you see the dynamic, all-too-easily. He bad. We good! Trump and anyone who supports him must be morally repugnant. We don't need to listen to Trump supporters – we already know they are terrible. And, of course, in so doing – we engage in deviance-labelling – an activity usually restricted to those people out there who oppose justice. The practice of unselfconscious deviance-labelling today, is a favourite hobby of enlightened, educated, academic liberal.

We often talk as if we are the enlightened ones—the custodians of equality, the defenders of dignity. But the same four-stage deviance labelling process is at work:

We define what is morally acceptable in our institutions, in accordance with the moral entrepreneurs we deem righteous, who have shaped our ownmost heartfelt ethical frameworks; We draw the lines of insider/outsider—those who “get it” and those who “don’t.”; We label: Trump voters as racist, Brexit supporters as ignorant, religious conservatives as bigots; And we stigmatize—through ridicule, cancellation, exclusion.

And quite often, those we dismiss are from the lowest echelons of society, the least educated, the poorest. They are not correct. Not educated. Labelled. Shut down. Cast out. It's deviance labelling. All over again. But this time, it's being done by people convinced they're doing the Lord's work – or at least, presuming justice is on our side. The rightness of our cause—becomes self-righteousness.

Of course – it's different in our case, because we actually *Are* right. Like the story of a man teaching his son about the different words for a spoon – and

he held it up, and said – now, the French call it a cuillere, and the Germans call it a loffel, and we call it a spoon, which after all, is what it is. Our view is blatantly the only right and proper and valid view.

Enter Jesus: The Parable We Get Backwards

This is precisely the dynamic at play in one of Jesus' most disturbing and easily misread parables: the Pharisee and the tax collector.

Two men go up to the Temple to pray. One is a Pharisee—a religious elite. The other is a toll-collector—a deviant collaborator with the Roman regime. The Pharisee prays, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people... especially not like this tax collector.”

At first glance, we're invited to roll our eyes. We see this man as a smug, arrogant, self-congratulatory hypocrite. I am right – those who disagree with me are wrong. I am in, they are out.

We are the ones who, confident in our moral convictions, look around and whisper—sometimes only in the echo chambers of our minds—“Thank God I'm not like them. Not like Trump. Not like those small-minded populists. Not like those racists or climate-deniers or the wilfully ignorant.”

No, I am fully-fledged, justice-loving, round-earther. Or in other words, I thank thee God that I am not like this Pharisee.

The tax collector, by contrast, doesn't even look up. He beats his chest and says, begging for God's help in making himself right. He is the labelled deviant – none of that unselfconscious moral smugness. Just aware of the inescapability of his social conditioning – and for that reason, he is one, who walks away justified.

The Devastating Irony of Identity Politics

Identity politics originally emerged as a corrective to deviance labelling. It aimed to affirm the dignity of those marginalised: Black, queer, trans, disabled, poor. And that work remains essential.

But identity politics, when untethered from humility, can all too easily mutate. In some circles, it can begin to mimic the same mechanisms it was meant to resist. It names new moral entrepreneurs. It redraws the boundaries of the righteous. It assigns deviant labels—often to those who used to be inside the circle. It makes space, for unforgivable sins, for irreversible exclusion.

When that happens, EDI doesn't die at the hands of Trumpists. It withers from the inside. Because righteousness has curdled into collective self-righteousness.

Jesus offers no cheap answers. But he does offer an alternative.

“Everyone who exalts themselves will be humbled. And those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

That line cuts through both Trumpism and progressivism. It unmasks the power games of empire and the moral vanity of the academy. It refuses the easy binaries of good and evil. When we draw that line between good and evil, so that it separates a good ‘us’ from an evil ‘them’,- we are already on the wrong side of that line. I can’t remember who said it, but that line between good and evil runs right through the middle of each of us.

And New Testament authors were hyper aware of this dynamic – it's what underlies a phrase that sounds religious nowadays – but is a highly astute psychological assessment of the human condition: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves. And the truth is not in us.” (1 John 1:8).

In the weeks ahead, as we talk about the death of EDI, we will rightly confront the forces that have opposed it from without. But we also need to ask hard questions about our complicity from within.

Jesus did not bless moral purists, or the arbiters of justice. He said that the blessed are those who perpetually hunger and thirst for justice. To do that, we will be seeking voices from across the college community, so that we hear a variety of perspectives.

Because unless we return, again and again, to the humility of the tax collector, we risk becoming the Pharisee we thought we left behind.