

Conflict v. Harmony

May 13, 2004

bob mccue

<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

I am indebted to the philosopher Alan Watts for the following bit of wisdom. In one of his books, he notes that conflict at one level of life often is a requirement for harmony in another. For example, he points out the immense conflict between the various organisms that make up our bloodstream and the rest of our biology. Were it not for this conflict, the harmony that we experience as human individuals would not be possible. A related point, which Watts did not make, is that our extensive use of antibiotics has disrupted some of the conflict within our biological systems. This disruption has caused "superbugs" to develop to level the playing field. The lesson for us is that we need to be careful with respect to how much conflict we eliminate. Complete peace is not the ideal we so often imagine.

Joseph Campbell said something years ago with regard to conflict respecting religious organizations. He said that heresy is the lifeblood of any institution. This, in his view, is because institutions are incapable of remaining sufficiently in touch with their environment in order to continue to be functional. Heretics within any institutional system are those who criticize the institution, usually because it is becoming out of touch with its environment. Hence, heretics act as a kind of warning system or tuning system that keeps the organization on course. They are the sentient edges – an important part of the nervous system – of the institution.

Max Weber referred to this concept with his distinction between "priests" and "prophets". The priests are the organizational leaders who want stability and to remain in control. The prophets are usually heretics who are recognized eventually to have been helpful. They lob information or insight bombs in over the institution's walls, to the chagrin of the priests. This is part of the lower level conflict that produces harmony at higher, organizational levels since heretics help create balance between environmental and institutional realities.

There are many examples of the kind of heresy I have in mind within the Mormon Church, Mormon culture and Mormon history. For many years, there were heretical cries within Mormonism respecting the plight of black people. Eventually, those cries were heeded and a "revelation" came that rectified at least part of the racism inherent within Mormon theology.

Heretics have also decried the patriarchal and authoritarian nature of Mormonism and have pled for (or demanded – heretics come in different styles) a greater role for women within the Mormon Church. While many would say that the pendulum in that regard has hardly moved, I suggest that it has started to swing and believe that it will continue to move. However, this process will be far too slow to satisfy most, and many (such as me) will have long decamped before it will have moved in a material fashion.

The same kind of thing can be said with regard to the concerns quite fairly raised by the gay community with respect to Mormon policies. The stakes in that regard are, however, much higher. If LDS leaders acknowledged the legitimacy of the biological information that is coming out respecting homosexuality, and only the uncertainty it creates respecting the words of the prophets (they don't need to say science is right; just that the matter is uncertain), gay Mormon suicide rates are likely to go down. They could save human lives. But, that would weaken their own authority. The latter reality prevents them from assessing the biological information properly in my view, and hence the suicides continue. This is a direct result of Mormon leaders having engendered such a high level of trust, and then acted to protect their organizational mandate. This process pits the continuing authority of the organization against the interest of many individual, trusting, members. This is played out in multiple ways within Mormon culture - the ox of particular groups of trusting individual Mormons (gays; women; intellectuals; etc.) is gored by the very Mormon leaders who have engendered that trust. And it is not a Mormon thing; it is a human thing. However, in most walks of human life, when a relationship of trust has been purposefully created (or even assented to), serious responsibility follows. I still believe that at some point this will become a legal liability point for the Mormon Church.

Some say perspective is everything, and while we recognize hyperbole in that statement, it is hard to overestimate the importance of perspective. We all wish to find peace, and yet many feel ourselves in a position of fundamental conflict with once loving and trusted family and community members. Perhaps one way to find peace within this conflict is to recognize the importance of that conflict in the big picture - it is part of what maintains social balance by connecting reluctant social institutions and the groups they serve to the greater reality. As noted above, heretics are an important part of the nervous systems of the organizations the care enough about to critique.

Another way to find harmony is to follow the Eastern wisdom of simply accepting what cannot be changed, and carefully deciding how to act with

regard to the few things over which we have control. Having made my decision to depart my inherited religion and hence create conflict between myself and many others, I can either carry a burden of regret respecting what I have lost and fear with regard to what the future may bring in that regard, or I can simply accept what I cannot change. I have found peace in that concept - simple acceptance.

The continuing role I play in conflict related to Mormonism from time to time is no more than a microscopic part of the Ying and Yang required for a much greater and more important harmony.