

REFLECTION



Beyond us and them

Seeing the world in terms of ‘us and them’ seems to be rooted in our make-up. I recently watched a video-clip about a war party of chimpanzees conducting a raid on another group of chimpanzees, and to me their actions seemed eerily like familiar scenarios of human conflict. Whether its gangs in our cities, drug cartels fighting a turf war, nations engaged in a border dispute, football supporters separated by a line of police, or two teams engaged in a polite contest of lawn bowls on a Sunday afternoon, unity in a group seems to be directly proportionate to the degree of opposition to another group. No matter how far back we go in history we seem to find the same old story of ‘us and them’: the Greeks and the Trojans, the Romans and the Barbarians, the Persians and the Turks, the English and the French. Even religion has not been immune: Jews and Gentiles, believers and infidels, Catholics and Protestants.

Robbie Young reflects on why we always tend to default to an ‘us and them’ position.

Progress today?

Today’s world doesn’t seem to offer much evidence that humanity has progressed beyond this binary opposition of ‘us and them’. In fact, one might argue that in recent decades the split has widened. We have Brexiteers and Anti-Brexiteers, Trump supporters and Trump protestors, fascists on the right and anarchists on

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*‘Us (us, us, us, us)
and them (them, them, them, them)
And after all we’re only ordinary men...’*

Pink Floyd



the left, the one-percent and the ninety-nine percent, citizens of a country and the refugees at its border. Populism and identity politics thrive on the paradigm of 'us and them'.

The need to belong

Why is it that 'us and them' seems to be the default condition of human experience? It begins with our natural tendency to belong. If you go to the stadium to support your local team you will automatically be drawn to join with fellow supporters. Without even thinking about it, you begin to see those around you in terms of 'us' and 'them' (the supporters of the other team). To belong to one group you have in some way to exclude others and there seems no way around this. As long as it remains just a friendly rivalry between two groups there is not too much to fear. But that's not always the case. Wherever there is antagonism, the threat of violence is never too far away. There is an internal logic at work here. Firstly, whenever I classify individual human beings as a 'them', I have taken the first

step towards their de-humanising. Secondly, to act in an aggressively violent way towards another human being requires that I somehow no longer see him or her as being fully human. Only in this way can I justify to myself my violent behaviour. But in doing this, at the same time I also allow myself to become less human. The classic case is the totalitarian regime exterminating whole categories of human beings labelled as 'vermin'.

Diversity but not division

This being the case, it would seem that the paradigm of 'us and them' always carries within itself the potential for some form of dehumanisation. We only have to think of the relationship between the colonial powers and their colonial subjects. This is because the only fully human experience is that of a 'we' which goes beyond 'us and them'. The reality of 'we' unites but does not exclude. Unlike 'us and them', 'we' does not need any binary opposition to feed on. There is diversity, but not division. The reality of 'we' is based on the recognition of a shared humanity and the fullness of human personhood. The most familiar model of this that we know is the family. The experience of a family is always 'we'. If it comes to the point of an 'us and them' we can be sure that the family has ceased to exist as a family.

Sharing a common humanity

The great challenge before us is to think and act in terms of a paradigm of the human family. That's not necessarily a utopian dream. We saw a real example of this in the coming together of the international team of rescue workers who formed a great 'we' as they heroically battled to save the lives of those Thai boys and their coach trapped for two long weeks in a flooded cave. How else can we understand this if not by seeing it as a testimony of rescuers and the rescued sharing a common humanity where every single life is as precious as the whole universe? 🍃



Illustration: Pixabay

