

Recently I came across a quotation that expressed, with wonderful clarity, something that I kind of half-knew but had not articulated so well to myself. The historian John P. Meier, in the course of an argument about the historical Jesus of Nazareth, made the following generalization (Meier 1991, IV:279):

Despite the theoretical purpose of addressing and confuting one's adversaries outside, most religious apologetics and polemics are directed inward. Their real function is to give a sense of assurance and reinforcement to the group producing the polemics. Most apologetics and polemics are thus an attempt to shore up group solidarity and conviction within a community that feels insecure and under attack. The a priori conviction of such polemics is simple and unshakeable: "We are right and they are wrong, and now we will think up some reasons to prove that they are wrong."

A good social-scientific description this is not, but I think it is a sound observation nonetheless.

Meier is talking here specifically about religious polemics, but there is nothing peculiarly religious about the phenomenon he describes. In fact, when I first read it the light went on in my head because I felt it explained something that has long puzzled me about political discourse.

Leftist ideology is the unquestioned norm at my workplace, and it is sometimes pretty heavy handed. Leftist beliefs are often kept implicit: it is just assumed that we all hew to them and there even develop little mini-competitions among individuals each trying to be further to the political left. In this environment, we hear (and are expected to agree with and even recite) leftist arguments quite frequently. I am told there are rightist groups on campus, but, for whatever reason, I do not hear from them. So, on my way home, I sometimes listen to rightist talk radio. When I first flip it on it is like a breath of fresh air to hear what seems a daringly different point of view, but by the time I get half-way home it has started to be equally heavy handed, so I renew my commitment to being apolitical, and console myself with some music.

The thing about most of this political discourse, on both the right and the left, is that it is such nonsense. I used to think (with socially unfortunate results) that political arguments were jokes—the kind where you intentionally put together a non sequitur, or deliberately draw a completely absurd conclusion. Over the course of more than a few hurt feelings, I slowly came to realize that people take them very seriously.

And I know that I am vulnerable to the same sort of thing. Some theories, such as relevance theory, have a deep appeal to me, far in advance of any evidence. I have to struggle to be critical about them. Others, like psychoanalysis (at least in its primary Freudian version), repel me, and I have to struggle to give them a fair hearing. This is part of what makes good science difficult to do.

What strikes me about this is that there is this swath of culture—a pretty large swath, at least if measured in terms of public representations—that seems to be of this type. And it suggests that our judgment about the rationality or sensibility of an argument depends on proxies (no surprise there), among which the palatability of the conclusion ranks highly (again, no surprise).

What I am curious about is why this would be an effective means of building group solidarity. Does

the essential irrationality of the arguments have a function in building group solidarity? Or do group alliances matter only when the subject—politics, religion, scholarship—is so difficult that clear conclusions are impossible to establish?