

"THE TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS"

Seven subtle dangers Christians face when responding to tragedies

In an article in *Science* in 1968, Garrett Hardin coined the phrase "The Tragedy of the Commons", which described an economic scenario that occurs when **individuals exploit a shared resource (the commons)** to such an extent that the resource becomes unavailable to some or all.

In spiritual terms, it refers to a problem that occurs when individuals exploit an event or tragedy for personal or ministry gain to such an extent that resources, empathy and involvement become unavailable to the actual victims.



By Mike Burnard

The past month once again bore witness to tragedy after tragedy. More than 70 people died a torturous death in a chemical weapons attack in Idlib, northern Syria. The suffering of the victims quickly shifted as major world powers got involved: the US stepped in, Russia complained, China watched and Europe condemned. In Egypt, 44 Christians were killed and hundreds were injured in two separate bomb blasts that rocked the holiest month on the Coptic calendar. The Islamic State rejoiced, President Sisi reacted and, for most, the Western Church turned to social media. The weeping and the mourning remained in Egypt, once again highlighting the subtle dangers when well-meaning people communicate and interpret tragedies through 'lenses' of self-interest.

Even though the phrase '*TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS*' mainly refers to a commercial environment, it also applies to social and spiritual principles where a tragedy that has communal consequences can so easily be exploited by people, even those with good intentions, but who ultimately seek to promote their own interests and use the destruction of others for personal gain.

The war in Syria, is a classic example. The situation has grown into one of the world's greatest humanitarian disasters, not so much because peace was removed from the community but because external powers entered the arena, propelled by self-interest for personal gain. What once was the 'common' that belonged to the people of Syria has now been exploited by others and became a '*TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS*': **Iran** and **Saudi Arabia** are engaged in a **proxy war**, with little concern for the people of Syria; **Sunni** and **Shia Muslims** are fighting a **religious war** and all suffer as a result; **IS** and **Turkey** are fighting a **holy war** with little concern for the people they represent; **Russia** and **America** have engaged in a new '**Cold War**' on the Syrian battlefield; the **Qataris** and **Saudis** are engaged in a **Wahhabi conflict**, fighting to speak on behalf of political Islam; the **Al-Nusra Front** and **IS** are embroiled in a battle to prove who are '**real**' **Islamic followers**; **Hezbollah** is battling the **Future Movement** - both are Lebanese movements fighting in Syria; in a **clash of Islamic identities**, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran are all hoping to leave their national imprint on the political Islamist movement in the region; and finally, the global organisation of the **Muslim Brotherhood** on one hand and the **regional Salafis** on the other are competing for **regional dominance**.

These proxy conflicts now determine the course of events in Syria, and the Syrian people themselves, on either side of the conflict, have very little control over them. A *'TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS'* has been unfolding over the past five years with disastrous consequences for local communities.

Sadly, the *'TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS'* is not an unfamiliar scenario in Christian circles where it has become far too easy to send WhatsApp messages of tragedies, dangers or disasters for the advance of ministry activities rather than from a concern for those who are affected.

These are the seven subtle dangers Christians face when responding to tragedies and disasters.

1. The subtle danger of SENSATIONALISM



There is always the subtle danger that compassion and anguish could be replaced by sensationalism. Sensationalism is often exhibited in the 'first-to-know news' of an attack, a bomb explosion, the excitement of a large gathering, the joy of a new convert, a testimony of deliverance, a healing, a vision or simply another miracle. These are all legitimate news items and worth sharing, but the snare in this well-disguised folly is often found in the fact that the incident takes preference over the individual.

Christians in the 'free world' are increasingly immersed in a culture that constantly draws our attention and emotions from one thing to another. As a ministry, we have received countless WhatsApp messages about the burning of churches in India and the IS attack in Qaraqosh (Iraq), yet we have not received a single message **seeking more information** on what happened to the victims and how support can be raised.

The words of a couple who were fleeing for their lives after converting to Christianity in Egypt pierced my heart: *"A convert to Christianity is not just a testimony to be told, but a real person. We are not just a story to be used to boost your faith; we are alive and need your actions more than your words."*

Whether we want to believe it or not, we are all sensation seekers. At one point or another, we all succumb to the subtle sin of sensationalism, the silent sin that is often disguised as sincerity.

Think about Paul. This persecutor, the Jew, the convert, the 'apostle of fire', found himself surrounded by people who shared the sensation of affiliation. But when Paul had to defend himself in court, the sensation seekers were nowhere to be found (2 Timothy 1:15, 2 Timothy 4:16), not even his faithful friend Demas (2 Timothy 4:10). Sure, everybody referred to him when they spoke about the saving grace of Christ. Of course, everybody used him as an example of the mighty works of God. Naturally, Paul became a template of the victory we have in Christ. But Paul, as an individual, was meaningless without his testimony in the eyes of sensation seekers. It was his testimony that mattered more than anything else.

Today, nothing has changed. The Church thrives on the testimonies of others who bear the cross on our behalf. The greater the sinner, the greater the miracle. The greater the salvation, the greater the sensationalism. The sensationalism of a Muslim who comes to know Christ through visions and dreams outweighs the need of the same convert who will now lose family, job and even life for the sake of this decision. When a whole village shares a common dream about Christ, it serves as a tremendous boost for our feelings of faith, but little is shared about possible persecution, isolation, ostracism and hardship that follows. This is the subtle sin of sensationalism. We pray for converts in the Muslim world, we share their testimonies in freedom and then we leave them to die, never enquiring about their well-being again.

I have met them. I am one of them. I am part of this sin. Lord, forgive me. I have cried with converts, I have shared their testimonies back home and too easily I have forgotten them. The sensationalism of the Persecuted Church trapped me. Lord, have mercy on me!

The subtle danger of ESCAPISM



The bomb blasts in Egypt, the pain of loss within the small Christian communities and the deaths of brothers and sisters in Christ probably went unnoticed in many Christian Churches the following Sunday, and the next, and the next.

A recent poll by Barna Research Associates surveys reports that nearly half of all the pastors in America's churches today do not want to tell their congregations that there are forces in the world that persecute Christians for their beliefs, because it's a "downer".

This might not be true in all Western nations and is definitely not true for all Western churches but it does send a warning signal to anybody who serves the Lord in freedom, safety and abundance. The Barna Research Associates say a significant majority of American Christians, some three out of four, want to hear about the Persecuted Church. But the same study showed that 52 percent of America's pastors don't want to talk about persecution and have no plans to talk about it.

Aidan Clay, Middle East Area Specialist for Christian human rights group *International Christian Concern*, believes the problem comes from the pulpit: "The Persecuted Church reminds us that the decision to follow Christ is all or nothing," Clay said. "It reminds us that Jesus promises persecution in the Scriptures and that the Christian life was not intended to be easy."

Clay says the reality of Christian persecution isn't popular. "That's a difficult teaching to swallow in some American churches today that are centred on self-improvement and 'feel-good' sermons. And, perhaps pastors fear that the topic of Christian persecution will drive complacent Christians or those who are unsure what they believe out of the church" Clay says.

We all profess that sacrifice is a Biblical virtue that builds and reveals character. But most of us pray that someone else will have the privilege of experiencing this. Escapism is a 'TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS'.

The subtle danger of SEMANTICS

As the *World Watch List* of 2017 was introduced by *Open Doors*¹, the world took note that North Korea had once again been identified as the number one country where Christians are persecuted, for the 15th year in a row. *Pew Foundation*² in their survey (2015) listed Egypt, China, Iran and Russia as the top four countries with very high government restriction on religion, and Syria, Nigeria, Iraq and India as the countries with the most extensive social hostility involving religion. *Morning Star* listed Meriam Ibrahim of Sudan as the most significant persecution story of 2014. In 2010, the *Atlas of Global Christianity* listed Saudi Arabia as the country with the most governmental restriction on religion. It also listed India as the country with the most societal-governmental restrictions on religious freedom, with China topping the list of religious violence indicators. Iraq topped the list for religious conflict. The 'Back to Jerusalem' movement lists Iraq and Syria as the two most dangerous countries to be a Christian.

¹ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/>

² <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/11/rise-in-countries-with-very-high-government-restrictions-on-religion-in-2015/>

All the lists are legitimate, justified and at the same time confusing. Is this simply a matter of perception and ministry involvement or does it depend on semantics and definitions? Is the most dangerous country to be a Christian the same as the most restricted country? Do these semantics really matter or does it simply distract attention from the real issue, that if one member suffers the whole body suffers with it, regardless of why the member suffers?

The challenge for many ministries is that we often use semantics to define significance. If Western semantics and definitions are a measure, then a bomb blast in Egypt is seemingly not as serious as a vehicle attack in London, regardless of the number of people killed. If theologians define roles, semantics would determine whether those attending the Palm Sunday service were really martyrs for Christ or just people being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Is it the *persecuted* Church or the *suffering* Church? Do the bomb blasts constitute a new wave of persecution in Egypt, or were they an isolated event that does not reflect a trend of any future value? These are sadly all semantics that nullify events of tremendous spiritual significance and move them on to agendas for board meeting discussions.

A major obstacle to a full Biblical understanding of the divine function of persecution is a Western theology that seeks to define a word instead of understanding the principle – a theology that is foreign in experience and therefore seeks to diminish its significance through definition and to demonise hardship, risk, suffering and sacrifice. This attitude invalidates God’s design for the advance of His Kingdom and the making of disciples through the suffering of His saints.

For Christians in Egypt, there is little doubt that every single brother and sister who died in the bomb blast was a martyr for Christ. The semantics and definitions of what this means is simply written with blood, and not the ink of English dictionaries.

When semantics are added, it becomes a ‘TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS’.

The subtle dangers of CLICKTIVISM



‘Clicktivism’, the use of social media in supporting a cause, has become a conscience-soothing alternative for *activism*, and sensationalising persecution will ultimately result in ‘click-tivating’ persecution. When the 200-plus schoolgirls were kidnapped from Chibok (Nigeria) in April 2014, it drew international outrage in the early days after the news hit the global media. In a short space of time, the social media Twitter hashtag #BringBackOurGirls became a top trend among international leaders like

Michelle Obama as well as numerous celebrities; by 11 May it had attracted 2.3 million tweets and it has been described as one of the world’s biggest social media campaigns. But Boko Haram did not bring back the girls, and the unresolved kidnapping saw a massive decline on social media platforms as well as mainstream news media reports. Today, only three years later, few can even remember the incident, let alone ask questions about the girls.

In one edition of *A World in Motion*, INcontext referred to the dangers of ‘clicktivism’ – **the appearance of ‘doing something’** by signing online petitions that have little impact in reality. The disillusionment and frustration of the parents of the kidnapped Nigerian schoolgirls highlights a secondary challenge – the tendency for flares of emotional engagement and concern that are soon forgotten. On one hand, the media can be accused of

pursuing sensational stories that play on human emotions in order to generate a temporary public response, but the reality is that our human nature is drawn to the 'big stories' until something else claims our attention and emotions.

Dan Hodges, in an opinion piece for *The Telegraph*, commented on this tendency: "Our basic sense of compassion and intolerance of injustice should enable us to embrace more than one worthy cause at a time. Except it's quite clear that in the social media age, we can't... [Facebook and Twitter can] bring to people's attention vital issues that would previously have been ignored, or if communicated via traditional media outlets, [would have] resulted in a giant global shrug. 'That's terrible. But what can we do?' But as we've seen, what Twitter and Facebook give with one hand, they take with the other. As soon as their focus shifts, so does ours. And the very nature of the medium – fast, transient, superficial – means that focus never stays in the same place for long."

The subtle danger of COMMERCIALISM

A quote, attributed most often to Rev. Sam Pascoe, gives a short version of the history of Christianity, and it goes like this: "Christianity started in Palestine as a fellowship; it moved to Greece and became a philosophy; it moved to Italy and became an institution; it moved to Europe and became a culture; it came to America and became an enterprise."

Sadly, raising funds for the persecuted has also become a lucrative business. Some organisations and individuals are enriching themselves by exploiting the needs of those who suffer extreme hardship and suffering.

A Jewish Rabbi was once asked to comment after watching a video where a TV evangelist visited Nigeria to pray for the sick. Before and after praying, the evangelist took up an offering from the poor to 'secure their healing'. He arrived at the meeting in a helicopter, dressed in a white suit and returned to his five-star hotel after the meeting in the same manner. The sick left in the same way that they arrived, destitute and poor. The evangelist left richer and with another 'feather in his cap' for reaching another nation with the "gospel of Christ".

The only words the Rabbi said after watching the one-hour video were the following: "***I pray to God in heaven that there will be a special place in hell for those who enrich themselves through the needs of others.***"

This is the 'TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS'. And this tragedy should be avoided at all costs. There should be a caution for all who dare to speak on behalf of those who carry the cross of Christ. May our lifestyles always reflect those whom we serve and may God forbid that we ever put their sacrifices to shame.

The subtle danger of RELATIVISM



are persecuted or face the levels of hostility experienced by millions of Christians around the world.

To argue that materialism and wealth somehow make it more difficult to follow Christ than living in grinding poverty is deeply problematic, both theologically and ethically. ***It dismisses or diminishes the actual sufferings***

of our fellow believers and turns us into victims. This results in apathy towards the suffering of the global Church and encourages us to be insular and self-obsessed. It is emphatically wrong, (no, following Christ is not normally difficult here in the West) and ethically corrupt (they, not we, are victims and we are the ones in a position to help).

Adopting a victim mentality while others are actually suffering for what we believe is indeed a *'TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS'*.

The subtle danger of SUBJECTIVISM



The biggest danger in responding to global events is not the inconsistency of **information flow**, determined by a lack of availability of knowledge, but the consistency of **behavioural flow**, determined mainly by subjective opinions and preconceived ideas.

Subjectivity is deeply rooted in our cultural worldviews and will ultimately determine our convictions and our preferences, which in turn will determine our behaviour and reporting. The sad reality is that we all believe what we want to believe and often surround ourselves with people who will supply us with our preferred sources of information. Subjectivism is the barrier that will imprison our minds and prevent us from being fully transformed into the image of Christ. And make no mistake, we all have preconceived notions that define our understanding, determine our actions and limit our obedience.

It is subjectivity that turns refugees into terrorists and replaces anguish with fear. It is subjectivity that interprets prophecies with prejudice instead of redemptive purposes. It is subjectivity that labels people as the 'enemy' instead of seeing people as being created in the image of God. It is subjectivity that turns opportunities into challenges and involvement into apathy. It is subjectivity that establishes attitudes of hostility towards other political, ethnic, racial, social or religious groups and turns reconciliation into suspicion. It is subjectivity that moves hearts towards judgment and slander instead of prayer and hope.

Just like subjectivity prevented the religious rulers of Jesus' time from recognising the Messiah, subjectivity will prevent modern-day believers from identifying the greatest opportunities of our generation. With millions seeking refuge, wars abounding, nations in turmoil, leaders fighting for power, the Muslim world at a crossroads and the Christian centre of gravity shifting to the East, there is no doubt that we now live in the 'days of opportunities'.

SOURCES

<https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/>

<http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/11/rise-in-countries-with-very-high-government-restrictions-on-religion-in-2015/>

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