

## Impositions and invitations

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“Hey pastor, what do you have to say about this graffiti? What do you think it means?” The question came from the teenage son of our German friends as we were walking around the old town of Rethymnon on a warm late-summer day on the Greek island of Crete around a month ago. I gave the image a quick glance and decided to do the responsible pastoral thing and turn the question back on my interrogator. “I don’t know, what do *you* think it means?”

I was expecting a bit of playful banter, not much more. I wasn’t really prepared for his response. “I think it means that the church imposes its beliefs on people—that it takes people’s money and uses its power to force people to believe what it wants them to.” My young friend was evidently taking this graffiti a bit more seriously than

I had been anticipating.

My first instinct was to consider the source. Being the parent of teenagers, I am dimly aware that this is a subset of the population that is perhaps uniquely primed to detect the slightest whiff of external authority and to doggedly and heroically resist it. Indeed, to be the parent of a teenager is often simply to *be* an imposition. *I exist therefore I impose*. Or something like that. If there's anything that teenagers don't seem to appreciate, it's being imposed upon. But I was just (barely) smart enough not to write my young friend's comment off as a bit of youthful impudence.

And, consequently, the conversation that followed was a fascinating one. We talked about indoctrination and why any of us believe the things we believe, the role that parents and authority figures play in the worldviews we embrace or reject, the extent to which any of us are really "free thinkers," and the very real culpability of the church—past and present—in behaving in precisely the way the image suggests: mercilessly hammering ideological content into compliant and powerless human beings.

As a representative of the institutional church, I obviously am pleased to think that we don't behave this way any more. At least *my* church obviously doesn't. We encourage questions and dialogue and respect people's freedom; my sermons are less didactic than they are narrative. We are transparent with how our funds are used and we have all kinds of checks and balances in place to prevent the abuse of power.

But while we may not be as crude or authoritarian as past expressions of the church (or at least while we may not *imagine* that we are), it is undeniable that the church—my church, your church, every church—is still imposing *some* view of the world upon those souls brave enough to walk through our doors each week. We are saying that some things are true and worth pursuing and that some are false and worth walking away from, that some things are beautiful and worth embracing, while others are ugly and worth rejecting. And the same is, of course, true in countless other domains of human life, be it parenting or politics or education or the media or whatever.

We are always being imposed upon, whether we like it or not, whether we recognize it or not, and no matter what the impositions look or sound like. We humans tend to cherish this persistent illusion that other people out there—usually those who

happen to hold views that we find distasteful—have been indoctrinated, whether by their church or their blinkered upbringing or the politically biased media that they daily subject themselves or a combination of other nefarious influences, while we think the way we do because we have carefully considered the facts and have come to the reasoned and admirable conclusions that we (humbly) embrace. But this simply is not true. We all believe what we believe because we have been imposed upon, at least to *some* extent, no matter how reticent we are to admit this. Perhaps the most subtle of impositions are those cultural myths that train us to imagine that we are never imposed upon!

It seems to me that the important question to consider as we live and move and have our being, as we interact with others, as we wield power and influence or are on the receiving end of it ought to be something along the lines of, Given that *all* human views are formed by myriad forces outside our control, to what extent are we inviting and to what extent are we imposing? And when? Some situations require more of one than the other, after all.

I think that if pressed most of us would say that responsible parenting requires at least *some* imposition of views, unfashionable as it might be to admit this and much as we might be pleased to imagine that the sum total of our parental duty is to present our young saplings with a smorgasbord of ideological options from which to choose for their independent selves. Whatever we might say, we all *do* this, even if only by the example we set (or fail to set). We are always indoctrinating our children into *some* vision of what matters and what doesn't in the world. There's no avoiding imposing our views.

What is true of parenting is true of politics and it is true of religion, if in different ways and to differing degrees (not least because the power dynamic is or ought to be different!). We are always imposing and inviting, often barely aware when one morphs into the other or of why and when it does so. Nearly every human interaction contains within it the seeds of both and it is naive (at best) to fail to recognize this and factor it into our reflection upon how and why we all think the way we do.

But to return to where we began, what of faith? Is it possible for the church to draw people to Jesus while calling to mind better images than the one that caught my young friend's eye in an old Greek town? Well, I think we need only to look to Jesus himself to see that it is. Jesus was a great respecter of human freedom and

independence—perhaps the greatest who ever lived. *Who do you say that I am? Decide for yourself. You have heard it said, but I say to you ... And now, what do you say? Choose for yourself.*

But at the same time, Jesus' life and teaching and death and resurrection, his creation of a community within which to learn and to grow and to represent him to the watching world, was an imposition of the most radical sort. Jesus knew, after all, that human beings are not wonderfully neutral blank slates upon which to imprint the goodness and truth of God. We are creatures who seem perpetually bent inward and sometimes require the imposition of more accurate and jarring understandings of who we are and what we have been summoned to before we will even consider an invitation toward better things.

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