

Facebook as the new public square: Debating religion by updating your status

When I first joined Facebook, status updates focused on recounting mundane daily activities, such as: “I had a great omelet for breakfast,” or “Found some great deals at the grocery store.” Fortunately, our use of social media has evolved, and amid the traditional pictures, comical forwards and announcements, a growing number of people are now sharing links to online articles and blogs. Depending on your friends and subscriptions, your Facebook feed could serve as a veritable gateway to the news.

On the one hand, the distance of social media allows people to express their religious views more boldly. While I am hesitant to bring up religious topics with my acquaintances in daily encounters, sticking with the noncontroversial topics of the weather and sports, I have no reservations about posting religious articles on Facebook, clearly visible to my diverse collection of friends, representing a hodgepodge of different faiths as well as non-believers.

On the other hand, the separation of the online environment that allows us to be bolder with our religious activities also enables more bluntness in the comment section. People tend to be more civil in face-to-face discussions, avoiding confrontation and using veiled criticism, but individuals online are more inclined to be direct and frank with their comments.

Mix the extra brashness of Facebook users with the intensity of recent religious debates, like same-sex marriage and the HHS mandate, and a highly contentious atmosphere emerges. In short, Facebook is the new arena for the masses to debate, replacing the Greek agora, Roman forum, medieval university, and Enlightenment salon.

I make it a habit to NOT get involved in online debates due to my lack of time and what I see as the tendency of many people to only state their opinions rather than engage the other side. Nevertheless, I have been drawn to read many threads, intrigued by the style of argumentation rather than the content, and I have noticed a

pattern emerging in many of the debates. Similar arguments appeared regardless of the topic, and in following paragraphs, I want to address four claims repeatedly leveled at people posting religious links.

Claim 1: Religious individuals are judgmental, intolerant bigots full of hatred.

Unfortunately, some Catholics are very hateful, and this was even more of an issue in the past. The official position of the church, however, is to love everyone, regardless of their actions or beliefs. We should not judge any individuals, and we should be tolerant of every person.

When the focus shifts to the realm of ideas and actions, we can and should be judgmental, and in some cases, reject and even hate ideas. Am I bigot or hater because I judged murder to be wrong? That is absurd.

The distinction between judging people and ideas is essential to maintain when debating online. Point out this difference often, and never slip into a personal attack, which undermines the Catholic position and drives people away.

Claim 2: It is wrong to assert general statements.

Even when one cautiously avoids discussing individuals, some people attack the ability to propose any universal statements. For example, X is wrong. This position is an extreme form of relativism and impossible to justify. The claim is a self-contradiction as it contains at least two universal propositions: (1) General statements exist. (2) They are wrong to assert. Typically, it is easy to debunk this line of reasoning by citing the numerous general statements made by the other individual.

Claim 3: A general statement is offensive to people who disagree with it.

This claim might be true, but I would counter that Catholics are more concerned with truth than not being offensive. If we are being polite, speaking the truth, and not discussing individuals, it is not wrong to offend someone. As a teacher, I might offend Johnny by instructing him that two plus two does not equal five, but I need to be truthful and correct him, even if it hurts his feelings.

Secondly, I would point out that religious individuals are not any more offensive than any other person holding a position. Every proposition is either true or false. If

Catholics believe X is wrong and dissenters hold X is right, their position is also a universal, and is it not equally offensive to Catholics who disagree with it? The whole concept that religious people always think they are right and everyone else is wrong is a scam. Everyone does!

Claim 4: Since the church has so many problems, it should not tell other people what is right and wrong.

This claim represents a simple ad hominem argument, a common fallacy that seeks to discredit an argument by attacking the messenger. We would all be in trouble if only perfect individuals could give instructions. There would be no instructions. The best way to defuse this argument is acknowledge the errors done by church members, starting with the denial of Peter and continuing to the present day. The church is composed of men, and all men are sinners. It does not mean the message is wrong.

Conclusion

What can we learn from this review? One glaring consistency is the hypocrisy of some of the claims: hatefully calling someone a hater, condemning general statements with a universal, claiming offense while equally offending someone else, and instructing someone not to instruct others.

I am, however, very sympathetic to the last claim. We need to look inward before we look at others, being the hardest on ourselves, the next toughest on those closest to us, and the most lenient with those who disagree with us. Sadly, we often do the reverse.

Lastly, the main point of this article is that the method of argumentation is much more important than the content. Onlookers will forget the syllogisms but remember the tone of the exchange. Convince people with your charity more than your rhetoric.