



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR
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WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Roadside theology

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In discussions of the role of religion in the public square, it is generally grand questions of conscience which take the focus of analysis. Mostly we discuss, indeed parse, such moral dilemmas as abortion, euthanasia, refugee policy, or crime and punishment. These are important, and fundamental ethical discussions about both who we are as a society, and who we are as Christians. Implicit in all of this discussion is the proposition that theology has something to say, and that what it has to say must apply both to such matters as these, but also to the less pressing but more mundane – indeed, the more immediately relevant.

Those who grow up in the faith are often assured that there is no place that God may not be. For those from pietistic traditions, that is generally personalised. There is a proper Christian sexuality; a proper Christian daily rhythm; proper Christian interpersonal relationships and so on. Those whose tradition is less inwardly focussed, instead look for Christian ways of being in the world: a Christian sociology; a Christian politics; a Christian economics. Both of these approaches, although sometimes portrayed as mutually exclusive, are in fact complementary to one another and are largely matters of emphasis which emerge from different traditions of how to read and interpret scripture.

That is the irony here. As individuals, we face the big questions very rarely. When we do, they become (often literally) matters of life and death. But mostly, when we talk, for example of the issues surrounding euthanasia, we talk of something that (generally) happens to someone else. Travel, on the other hand, is a daily occurrence. Whether by public or private transport most of us or on the road every day. How could there not be a theology of road safety?

Declaration of Interest

I do have a confession to make here. I would never have begun to think these thoughts or reflect on this question if I had not been made the Principal Policy Officer to the Minister for Road Safety. I was given Road Safety because my Minister was given Road Safety. It's not a big government agency. In Western Australia, it is situated within the Police Department, has a staff of about twenty-eight people and a budget allocation of a hundred million dollars derived from fines collected from drivers caught by speed and red light cameras. Daily work with the Road Safety Commission, daily exposure to their passion, daily reading of road toll figures, daily reading of – sometimes abusive – correspondence, all compel me to ask the question – what is the theology of road safety?

Let us begin with some observations. The road is a curious place. People exhibit private behaviours publicly. A motor vehicle is not just a conveyance. It is also a kind of identity. Shape and colour; engine size; vehicle size; type of fuel consumed; bumper stickers; vanity plates; stripes; spoilers; all come together to create the public visage of the driver inside. For many people, this shell functions as a kind of mask which enables them to do things that they would not otherwise do in public, and those things generally amount to bad behaviour of one kind or another. Whether it is speeding, aggressive driving, refusing to merge sequentially, tailgating, tooting, fist-shaking or verbal abuse, these behaviours, which are the expression of a peculiar kind of self-absorption, that might only otherwise be manifest through the disinhibition associated with alcohol or drug abuse. What we call “road rage” is a phenomenon that is best understood as a manifestation of radical individualism. Locked inside our metal shells, we see no other people with whom to interact on a human level. The road becomes a place of many thems with no thous.

Jesus, of course, challenges us to think differently. In the New Testament era, the road was a place of danger, but a different kind of danger to the one routinely braved by contemporary wayfarers. Paul says something of this in his second letter to the Corinthians when he speaks of the dangers that he has faced in travel: “...on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters...” (2. Cor. 11.26).

In this series of doublets, the principal dangers of the road are crossing rivers and vulnerability to thieves.

Jesus himself, as an itinerant preacher, was familiar with the road and its dangers. It is not surprising, then, to find one of the most powerful and memorable of his parables – that of the Good Samaritan – set on the road. The story itself is told in Luke’s Gospel, as a response to the question “Who is my neighbour?” It is a lawyer’s question. It seeks a clarification of the commandment “you shall love your neighbour as yourself”. One of the really interesting things about the Parable of the Good Samaritan is that it is set on the road. The injured man at the heart of the story is an ancient victim of the road. In antiquity, the road toll was no so much in those killed or seriously injured in vehicle crashes, but in those who were set upon by thieves, beaten and robbed. Here, the story is set on what we might call a “black spot” – the Jerusalem to Jericho road. This road, about twenty-five kilometres in length, plunged from the mountain ridge upon which Jerusalem sat at an elevation of 745m above sea level, to the valley trench of the Jordan valley, 258m below sea level. It was a difficult road, and notorious for its bandits and there is some archaeological evidence that the Romans sought to garrison the road to protect travellers.

In the story, as related by Luke, had a priest and a levite ignoring the plight of the traveller. They passed by, giving the injured man a wide berth, perhaps fearing for themselves and their own safety, or for their ritual purity, if they stopped and tended to the wounds of the injured man. Instead, the man is then tended by the outside, the Samaritan, who is “filled with compassion”. The point that the parable goes on to make is about neighbourliness. The bandits’ victim shared the road with many, but only one acted towards him in a neighbourly way, the one who “showed mercy”.

The intent of the story is not to make a point about being careful on the road, but about the nature of community. There is, nevertheless, an implication that we can reasonably draw about the road and its dangers. There are two ways to approach travelling on the road: either as an individual negotiating a set of hazards – some potentially fatal – or as a part of a broader community of road users in which we are marked out by responsibilities to one another. Every piece of contemporary social ideology screams at us to become powerful persons. This is the pervasive Enlightenment doctrine of the individual which ennobles choice and valorises the capacity to choose. In this model. Road users are in competition with one another. They compete for car-lengths and opportunities to enter, proceed in, and leave, lines of traffic.

Taken to its extreme, this competition can become violent and lead to what is called “road rage”. This can take the form of aggressive driving, like tailgating, or even ramming or physical assault. In a case that was livestreamed on Facebook in September 2018, the passenger in one vehicle used a baseball bat to smash the driver’s side window of another vehicle while both driver and passenger shouted obscenities (<https://thewest.com.au/news/crime/police-minister-michelle-roberts-slams-south-west-road-rage-attack-ng-b88978119z>).

Earlier this year, the WA Government introduced regulations requiring drivers passing tow trucks or service vehicles going about their business in a breakdown lane to slow down to 40kph and, if possible, move into a further lane in order to provide safety to the workers and breakdown victims while work was progressing. This measure, known nationally as SLOMO, the acronym of “Slow Down, Move Over”, was introduced in response to a number of incidences of fatal and serious injury suffered by roadside workers going about their jobs and those motorists whom they were seeking to assist. It is, nevertheless, problematic amongst some drivers who complain that the speed is impractical. That has led some state governments to be slower and more limited in its introduction and implementation. NSW has determined, for example, that SLOMO only need apply in relation to police and emergency service vehicles, thereby excluding towtrucks and roadside assistance vehicles.

SLOMO is a measure that is essentially neighbourly. It asserts the mutual responsibility of all road users and creates a rule which establishes a standard of neighbourly behaviour. It also comes into direct conflict with the competitive model of road use which sees those halted by the road, and the others who come to assist them, simply as more hazards to be negotiated.

That competitive model necessitates a measure of risk and the notion of winners and losers on the road. But the risks are not casual, nor are their consequences trivial. They are nevertheless generally assumed as the price that is paid for the convenience of daily car travel. The Victorian Transport Accident Commission, in the course of its “Towards Zero” campaign, developed and distributed a powerful advertisement. In it, a man is asked what an “acceptable” level of road deaths might be and, somewhat hesitantly, he replies, “I dunno...maybe...seventy?” This was the point to which the script had reached. The interviewer then responded, “This is what seventy people looks like” and seventy people emerged from behind a building – but not just any seventy people. They were the interviewee’s family. Then, the question was asked again, “How many is acceptable”, and the answer the only answer, came back: “None, zero”.

The sub-text of this advertisement is quite important. It assumes that members of our community are, in general, prepared to accept a level of road trauma as inevitable, and therefore acceptable, so long as it does not happen to them or their loved ones. The slogan with which the advertisement is paired is “There is no-one someone won’t miss” (www.towardszero.vic.gov.au) The advertisement challenges the community, challenges all of us, to broaden our thinking beyond our immediate community of interest and regard all road users as people for whom we all, somehow, share a common responsibility. This campaign seeks to do more than shift an understanding of road safety. It seeks to challenge the way in which we collectively imagine community and our capacity to take responsibility, indiscriminately, for one another.

The advertisement is part of a much broader campaign to change the way in which we think about roads and road safety. Road safety professionals have come to aspire to achieve what they have come to call a “step change”, or to achieve a Kuhnian “paradigm shift” in the way road users think about driving, about one another and about mutual responsibility. Christians have their own work to describe this. In Greek, it is *metanoia*; in English, it is “conversion”.

Road Safety professionals across the country have come to recognise that the only way in which we can safely navigate the hazards of road travel is to do so together. They seek, through advertising, regulation and legislation, to change community attitudes and the culture of the road.

The changes that they seek are not little – they are deep, as deep as the self-image of motorists and the daily habits that they breed.

The priests and the levites, the proud and the self-absorbed, want to get past those in need as soon as they can. They hurry past, deliberately uninterested, neither looking, nor caring. Ultimately, their road may lead to death or serious injury. Christian motorists are encouraged both by this parable and the instincts of our road safety professionals to be neighbourly, to regard the road as a place of community in which hazards are minimised because we are united in a common aim of getting safely to our destinations.

The road is a place of peril. While the nature of the danger has changed since the time of Jesus, the fact of danger has not. Neither has the need to face that danger not through assertive and egotistic individualism, but through the acts of radical neighbourliness to which Christians are daily called.