

Yanking your Chain

My sister owns a massive dog known as an English Mastiff. He's not yet a year old and weighs in at 160 pounds! He is so powerful that holding the leash is a task, even for the strongest family members. And so a special collar is required to cause slight discomfort to the dog and discourage his pulling and tugging.

For a dog this sort of apparatus is appropriate: In a world of cars and machines and all sorts of dangers he cannot comprehend, he needs to be held firm on a leash. But, put this sort of thing on the neck of a human being and you have an outrageous indignity. The image of a chain or a rope around the neck of a human being, being yanked and chafing the neck is part of the history of the slave markets of the 18th and 19th centuries in this country.

In modern parlance, having one's "chain yanked" is a euphemism for being deceived or manipulated. And this is a serious concern I have been expressing in this column related to the state of our culture today, both inside and outside of the Church.

Finally I've come upon a resource which addresses the core of the problem and **I highly recommend it to your viewing**, either via on-demand television or the PBS website:



Us vs Them: Hacking your Mind

Why is the parish priest promoting this secular television program? Because, if social media, news companies, and others have figured out an effective way to manipulate our thoughts, it definitely has moral and spiritual implications!

The basic thrust of this fascinating program is a phenomenon called **“Confirmation Bias:”** This is

defined as *the tendency to interpret new evidence as confirmation of one's existing beliefs or theories*. And the manipulative aspect enters in when, for the sake of major advertising dollars, social media and news companies employ sophisticated algorithms to monitor and shape your personal viewing habits. YouTube, for example, knows what you like and what you are watching, and it knows this with great precision. It will feed your biases with greater and greater precision until you are in your own, tailor made “candy store” of biases. Meanwhile, it is creating just such a candy story for the “other guy” who holds the opposite views, and whom you must regard as an idiot or as someone evil, (this is a metaphor drawn directly from the program).

This is not some crazy conspiracy theory: It is just the application of well-know human psychological theory and mathematics to manipulate you and me in the effort to target advertising in the most efficient manner possible. And, by the way, this is not a “right wing” or “left wing” biased process: It is “open season” on everyone. And, I think, it challenges us to slow down our judgement processes and do the hard work of critical thinking which the Good Lord has endowed us in our rational minds.

This moral and spiritual concern in all of this is that the polarized environment of the culture has engendered, what appears to be, a **visceral hate** of “the other guy.” Conservatives are not a large group of people, **they are one**, horrific caricature of the worst sort of authoritarian monster. Liberals are not a large group of people, **they are one**, perverse and twisted freak. This is the sort of toxic thinking engendered in all of this. And, clearly, if we are to be Christian in name and in truth, we cannot allow ourselves to be manipulated in such ways.

In an unexpected and impressive way, the television program showed a leader of a white supremacist group allowing a black counter protester to speak from the podium and a remarkable moment of mutual “humanizing” occurred between those two individuals and, perhaps, some in the crowds. It seemed as if “the scales had fallen” from the eyes of both and they were seeing that their respective “chains” were being yanked. There seemed to be real hope in that moment.