

Plenary Session

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How can I find God in the “Other”? Towards Responsible Religious Belonging

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Who is my „other”, who is my neighbour?

When thinking about the question of who the other person is to me, or who my neighbour is, the obvious go-to text in my faith tradition, Christianity, is the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). New Testament scholar Philip Esler thinks that this parable can be interpreted as a tool in the reduction of intergroup conflict. In what follows, I shall briefly summarize Esler’s analysis and try to show that this story can indeed assist us in finding better strategies in our intergroup conflict situations. Looking at this parable, it is quite clear that Jesus’ teaching has relevance to one of the most troubling problems of our time, namely, intergroup conflict of the ethnic type.

Social identity theory tells us that people obtain an important part of their self-concept from being categorized as members of certain groups. Group identity is stronger in collectivist, rather than individualistic cultures, so it is a main defining feature in most societies even today. But what happens when two people, who belong to different groups, interact? Research shows that in these situations the features that characterize group identity come to the fore, and our perception becomes stereotypical of both our in-group (positively) and the other person’s out-group (negatively). These stereotypes then govern the interaction to a large extent. Stereotyping means that we treat all members of the out-group as if they were the same, and we usually project negative attitudes towards them.

In the world of first-century Palestine, Judeans and Samaritans both regarded the other as a despised outgroup, despite the shared traditions enshrined in the Torah. Both parties committed atrocities against the other, so that in time the relationship became very bitter.

In the first part of our story (Luke 10, 25-28), a lawyer, wanting to test Jesus, asks the question: „What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Instead of answering, Jesus fires back another question: „What stands in the law? How do you read it?” The lawyer replies by citing first Deut 6:5 and then Lev 19:18. Essentially, he gives the correct answer (the double commandment to love God and neighbour). Jesus then seeks to end the discussion with „You have answered well; do this and you will live.” Yet this is an answer with a sting: it implies that the lawyer may not have fulfilled these Mosaic commandments. The lawyer then asks a second question: „And who is my neighbour?” The implication in the lawyer’s question is „Where does one draw the line?” It is a boundary question of an exclusionary type. What is the outer limit of the people we must treat as neighbours? Or in other words, who is in the in-group?

Jesus’ response is the parable itself. It is crucial that he does not identify the ethnicity of the man attacked on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. It is by no means certain that he was an Israelite. Jesus’ failure to specify the man’s ethnicity is essential to the case he establishes and to what happens

thereafter. The man had been stripped, this means that his ethnicity could not be determined by his clothing. Also, the man's nakedness meant that an observer could determine whether he was circumcised or not. If uncircumcised, he was a Greek or Roman and certainly not a neighbour. If circumcised, he was an Israelite or a Samaritan, or some other circumcising Semite.

The first man passing the victim and crossing to the other side of the road was a priest, who presumably made his own estimation of whether the man was a neighbour or not. He must have reasoned, if the man was circumcised, that he was not obliged to resolve his doubt in the man's favour. Also, there was another law, Lev 21:1-4 which forbade a priest from touching a corpse. The conflict of duties only arose, however, if the man was circumcised. Touching a corpse would have meant that the priest had to return to Jerusalem to undertake a complex ritual to remove the impurity.

The next traveller to see the man was a Levite, who also decided to cross to the other side. He probably made the same estimation as the priest, and though he had less reason not to help, he also decided to cross to the other side of the road.

At this point the lawyer was probably expecting the next person to appear an ordinary Israelite, in which case the story would have been a nice morality tale with an anti-clerical edge.

Jesus, however, introduces the Samaritan as the person who was moved by compassion and came to the aid of the half-dead man. This means that we are no longer dealing with an Israelite in-group legal discussion. That Jesus introduces a member of a hated out-group challenges the structure of group differentiation. Since Samaritans also acknowledged the Law of Moses as Torah, the Samaritan could also have embarked on the same legal calculation as the priest and the Levite. Yet for him, there was only one response: moved with compassion, he came to the aid of the wounded man.

It is important to note, that Jesus' final question to the lawyer was not whether the priest and the Levite were justified under the law in not treating the man as their neighbour. He asks instead: „Which of these three men seems to you to have been a neighbour to the man who fell among the bandits?“ Jesus seems to have shifted the goalposts, moving from „neighbour“ as a recipient of love to „neighbour“ as its agent. In telling the parable, Jesus has refused to indulge in group differentiation and stereotyping, and has subverted these processes by exposing them as inadequate and morally inferior when confronted with a particular human need. Whereas „neighbour“ previously had referred to the passive object of the group categorization process, now it applies to a person who acts properly to assist someone in need. „Neighbour“ in this sense is someone who ignores group boundaries to assist someone in need. Jesus thus calls for movement from a group-oriented to a universal ethic.

How does this parable speak to the question of the reduction of intergroup conflict? The first possibility is crossed categorization. Two relevant categories apply to the four main actors of the narrative. The first category is ethnicity, with the victim of unspecified ethnicity, the priest and the Levite being Judean, and the fourth a Samaritan. The second category consists of their status as persons travelling alone on a dangerous road. This new category, in the case of the Samaritan, overrides the category of ethnicity.

The second means by which categorization can assist in reducing bias is re-categorization. It means that in a conflict situation those who are initially perceived as members of an outgroup can be subsumed into a new and larger category and thereby be seen as ingroup members. In this story, the most common larger category is that of human being. This means that our common human status makes us eligible to receive acts of kindness.

A third approach is decategorization: dissolving the problematic boundaries altogether. If this happens, participants in social interactions will be less attentive to stereotypical information about others and more interested in the idiosyncratic features of each individual. Repeated person-to-person contact is likely to disconfirm negative stereotypes of the outgroup. This parable is concerned with this issue: how decategorization effected through a single interpersonal contact can be generalized beyond those caught up in the contact's dynamics. This is achieved by moving the focus from „neighbour” as the passive object of the group categorization process to „neighbour” as a person who acts properly to assist someone in need.