

OTHERNESS AND SELF: AN ESSAY ON THE CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF SELF AND OTHER

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When talking about *the other* and *otherness* we have to bear in mind that for other people, we are ourselves *the others*. It is an issue of perspective. Very often we are so proud about everything that expresses our identity and simultaneously we are keen in rejecting other's culture, tradition, religion, way of thinking and living. Our contempt can address *the other* in his/her diverse manifestations and conditions. *The other* can be in this case a foreign, a poor, somebody with whom we have not too many things in common. Maybe *the others* are behaving in the same way towards us, when we are in the position of a foreign, of a humiliated person, of a socially excluded and ignored individual. Anyhow, from a Christian point of view *the other* is not necessary the enemy, the dangerous foreigner, the source of my fears but, in a reversed perspective, he/she is my neighbour, my fellow, the spring of my joys and delights. Christianity contains a set of values which could help us to appreciate the other person when maybe our European education and culture of tolerance fail to do this. In this short essay I would like to underline a few basic concepts the Christian perception of *the other* is constructed on:

1. The Theological dimension of creation and revelation
2. The Christological dimension of otherness
3. The Ethical dimension as practical application of the two former dimensions

THE THEOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF CREATION AND REVELATION

Firstly, nobody can avoid God's self-definition in relation with us. He is for us *the Other*, *Das Ganz Andere* as Karl Barth calls Him. God surprises us in the wonderful and unexpected ways He interferes with our world. No human analogy can successfully describe Him, in the absence of God's own revelation. He is the *wholly Other* and somehow, in a mysterious way, He is the most

intimate presence in our lives, the very support of our existence. Like any real stranger, He has no proper name. On the other side, relating to Him, we became at the moment of creation *the whole Other*, but bearing in our most intimate structure the reflections of His image: rationality, sensibility and free will. But the possibility of creating a different being than Him is given in the fact that God is Three and One at the same time; three Persons which share the same nature, substance or Ousia, namely the Trinity. Each divine Person is different and yet bears *the Other* in Herself. In this way, the human being as a multiplied image of God at the most basic level contains in himself the image of *the other*. *The other* is I on a deeper level of understanding, while each one of us is a unique and un-reproducible person. From the above, we may conclude that *Otherness*, as a quality of different beings, was not intended to put a distance between God and us or among us. It is a “space” which affords us an infinite advance in the meeting of *the other*. Because *the other* is different than I, I have this chance to discover it and to grow together in a constantly deeper communion. Because *the other* is different, we are not living in a pantheist world, but in a world where each one of us is keeping his/her conscience.

THE CHRISTOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF OTHERNESS

Secondly, Jesus Christ is the strangest person who ever existed on our earth. As the incarnate Logos of the Father, He unites in Himself the most irreconcilable things. The Lord of glory entered in the depths of kenosis and assumed the form of a servant. For Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, the kenosis, as full obedience to the will of the Father, implies such a profound Self-emptying that he does not hesitate to consider it almost an estrangement of the Logos from Himself: “*But, in the character of the Form of a Servant, He condescends to His fellow servants, nay, to His servants, and takes upon Him a strange form.*”³⁶

For our sake, He “left” the Heavens and became a stranger, a wanderer in search of His own image – the earthly man. The Russian poet, Tyutchev, in his poem “Those poor villages” describes Christ as a pilgrim on the earth of Russia, wandering among the poor people and bestowing then His blessing:

³⁶ GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS. 1894. The Fourth Theological Oration (Oration 30). In *Nicene and Post-nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. (ed. Ph. Schaff, transl. Ch. G. Browne – J. E. Swallow). Vol. VII. Second series. New York : Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894. p. 311.

*"Landed with the burden of the Cross,
All through thee, my native land,
In the form of a servant, the King of heav'n
Went about, bestowing His blessing."*³⁷

In a liturgical text sung on the Vespers of Great Friday we have a much more powerful image of Christ:

*Come, let us bless Joseph of eternal memory,
Who came by night to Pilate
And begged for the Life of all:
"Give me this Stranger,
Who from His youth has been received as a stranger in this world.
Give me this Stranger,
Who has no place to lay His head:
Give me this Stranger
Whom an evil disciple betrayed to death.
Give me this Stranger,
The refuge of the poor and weary."*³⁸

³⁷ GORODETZKY, N. 1938. *The Humiliated Christ in Modern Russian Thought*. London : Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, New-York : The MacMillan Company, 1938. p. 7.

³⁸ *Triodion*, Vespers of Great and Holy Friday. See ΣΤΑΜΟΥΛΗΣ, Χ. Α. 2009. *Ερωτας και θάνατος : Δοκιμή για έναν πολιτισμό της σάρκωσης*. Αθήνα : Ακρίτας, 2009. p. 344. The original ancient-Greek version of the text is as follows:

«Τον ήλιον κρύψαντα τας ιδίας ακτίνας
και το καταπέτασμα του ναού διαρραγέν τω του Σωτήρος θανάτω,
ο Ιωσήφ θεασάμενος
προσήλθε των Πιλάτω και καθικετεύει λέγων:
Δος μοι τούτον τον ξένον,
Τον εκ βρέφους ως ξένον ξενωθέντα εν κόσμω.
Δος μοι τούτον τον ξένον,
ον ομόφυλοι, μισούντες θανατούσιν ως ξένον.
Δος μοι τούτον τον ξένον,
ον ξενίζομαι βλέπειν του θανάτου τον ξένον.
Δος μοι τούτον τον ξένον,
όστις οίδε ξενίζειν τους πτωχούς και τους ξένους.
Δος μοι τούτον τον ξένον,
Ον Εβραίοι τω φθόνω απεξένωσαν κόσμω.
Δος μοι τούτον τον ξένον,
ίνα κρύψω εν τάφω, ος ως ξένος ουκ έχει την κεφαλήν πού κλίνη.»

In the form of a servant, He shared the fate of the poor, of the unfortunate people, the status of “underdog”³⁹. As Philip Yancey put it, “Jesus Christ entered the world amid strife and terror, and spent His infancy hidden in Egypt as a refugee”⁴⁰. Later He faced the hate of those who didn’t accept His otherness. He knew what means to be rejected, isolated and condemned. His earthly life was one of rejection and existential loneliness. An Orthodox contemporary theologian describes thus Lord’s earthly condition:

*“He was a stranger for His estranged kin, who hated and killed Him as if He was a stranger. A stranger for His own disciples, who denied, questioned and challenged His strange truth in a continuous journey to Emmaus. A stranger for His own mother, whose certainty of maternal intimacy the sword harmed and created breaks in the conviction of the complex offered revelation. A stranger for all the creation, His own creation, of which He healed the breaks and the imperfections. A stranger for life, but a stranger as well for death which He astonished and conquered once and forever.”*⁴¹

Finally, Christ died as an outlaw, but His death inaugurated the greatest revolution of all times: the acceptance of *the other* and, more than this, the treatment of the neighbour with the same love as one has for himself/herself. The love for God includes the love for *the other*, who must become *our neighbour*: “The first of all the commandments is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: “*You shall love your neighbour as yourself*. There is no other commandment greater than these.”⁴²

THE ETHICAL DIMENSION OF OTHERNESS

This is the third and final point I want to make. In Christian teaching, there is no real distance between me and *the other*. *The other* is part of me⁴³, his sorrow

³⁹ YANCEY, Ph. 1995. *The Jesus I Never Knew : Why no One Who Meets Him Ever Stays the Same*. Glasgow : Marshall Pickering, 1995. p. 37.

⁴⁰ YANCEY, Ph. 1995. *The Jesus I Never Knew : Why no One Who Meets Him Ever Stays the Same*. Glasgow : Marshall Pickering, 1995. p. 33.

⁴¹ ΣΤΑΜΟΥΛΗΣ, Χ. Α. 2009. *Ερωτας και θάνατος : Δοκιμή για έναν πολιτισμό της σάρκωσης*. Αθήνα : Ακρίτας, 2009. p. 338.

⁴² Mark 12, 28 – 31.

⁴³ More and more theories, from socio-constructivist to psychoanalytical are recognizing the importance of otherness in the process of construction of the self. See COELHO, N. E. – FIGUEIREDO, L. C. 2003. *Patterns of Intersubjectivity in the Constitution of Subjectivity* :

is my sorrow, and his joy is my joy. In each human person we can discover the image of Christ, as a visible print of His face asking for our attention. The tight chain of our blood family's ties is broken and we are invited to share our love in universal brotherhood. From this perspective, nobody is an outsider. As Jesus cried over the grief of the poor, so we should do. For Jesus, nobody was to be despised; the same should be so for us. We have to wait patiently for each one's mystery to open to us: that of the immigrant student and worker, of the refugee, of the foreigner ... of *the other*. To understand this better and as well the way in which the Christians devoted to the cause of *the other* over centuries it is enough to have a look at Johannes Beerblock's oil painting *View of the Old Sick Ware of St. John's Hospital* (1778, Memling Museum, Bruges, Belgium). In this perspective, Mother Teresa of Calcutta is a well-known contemporary example of what should be *the other* for us.

Of course, like in the past, *the other* challenges us and sometimes scares us. The cohabitation with *the other* demands work and effort, and where there is work and effort there is maladaptation, pain and suffering⁴⁴. For many people, in J. P. Sartre's words, "*L'enfer, c'est les autres*" ("*Hell is others*"). However, Christian teaching proposes dialogue instead of hate, non-violence instead of war, care instead of indifference, understanding and acceptance instead of intolerance; and we have to admit that in the History of Christianity we oftenly have found the reverse of this. But every time when this happens, we are talking about an estrangement and a betrayal of the Christian spirit. I remember the words of a short book writer who accuses God of the injustices and the afflictions which hurt the unprotected people. "*What have you done to remove all this pain, Lord?*" cries the author. In a dream, God appears and answers: "*I created you!*"

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⁴⁴ COELHO, N. E. – FIGUEIREDO, L. C. 2003. Patterns of Intersubjectivity in the Constitution of Subjectivity : Dimensions of Otherness. In *Culture & Psychology*. Thousand Oaks, USA : SAGE Publications, 2003, Vol. 9, No. 3, p. 198.

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Abstract

Christianity contains a set of values which could help us to appreciate the other person when maybe our European education and culture of tolerance fail to do this. In this study I would like to underline a few basic concepts the Christian perception of the other is constructed on. Firstly, God is the wholly Other (Das Ganz Andere) in relation with His creature. On the other side, we became for Him at the moment of creation the whole Other. Secondly, Jesus Christ is the strangest person who ever existed on our earth, as the incarnate Logos of the Father who unites in Himself the most irreconcilable things. His earthly life was one of rejection and existential loneliness, but through His death He inaugurated the greatest revolution of all times: the acceptance of the other and, more than this, the treatment of the neighbour with the same love as one has for himself/herself. As a practical conclusion, we have to be aware that Otherness, as a quality of different beings, was not intended to put a distance between God and us or among us, but it is a "space" which affords us an infinite advance in the meeting of the other. The Christian theological perspective on otherness invites each one of us to share our love in universal brotherhood.

Keywords

Otherness, stranger, the other, Christ, neighbour, image, identity, suffering.