

The Other as Neighbor: Theological Considerations

DIRK EVERS

In my paper, I want to reflect on the biblical concept of one's fellow human being as neighbor. All major religions attempt to constitute and regulate relationships among their followers and the relationships between their followers and others, especially those in need of help and assistance, by means of religious concepts of proximity and distance. These regulations usually include considerations on religious values and virtues and how to achieve those through training and exercise. Therefore religion in general can be understood as a tool to deal with the ambivalences and ambiguities of the natural I-Thou-relationship. For the Judaeo-Christian tradition the biblical notion of love for one's neighbor is the central category which should qualify the believer's relationships with others.

In the following paragraphs, I want to reconstruct aspects of the Western history of thought on otherness and the neighbor, because it reflects the importance as well as the ambivalence of otherness to human beings and their behavior (I.). Then I explore this history in the light of the biblical notion of the neighbor (II.) and some prominent theological interpretations of it (III.), namely the Aristotelian-Scholastic concept (III.1) and Luther's interpretation of the love command (III.2). This will lead to the conclusion (III.3) that part of the transformation that the Christian faith intends to bring about is a transformation of perception, the view of the other. This transformation has affective as well as intellectual aspects and can be understood as a transformation of the fundamental moral landscape of a human being. The term »transformation« is justified insofar as the ambivalent experience of otherness will not be dissolved into universal philanthropy or become irrelevant, but will be rearranged so that its ambivalences become more manageable.

I. The Ambivalence of Otherness

In the history of Western thought, it was the philosophy of the Enlightenment which declared the fundamental equality of all human beings. When Immanuel Kant spoke about duties in relation to others, he referred to the teleological version of his categorical imperative in which he stated that every rational being must be regarded not as mere means but as an end in

itself¹. Therefore the relationship between one rational being and another has to be governed by respect (*Achtung*). And while Kant is suspicious of any kind of emotion which he sees as irrational and unproductive, respect is the only acceptable moral feeling or emotion (*moralisches Gefühl*) because it is brought forth by reason itself. Its object is the moral law which is the basis of human dignity and of the idea of human personality. Insofar as we inhabit a common moral and intelligible world, we have the duty to respect the personality of the other. Thus the duty of love for my neighbor is nothing but »the duty of respect for my neighbor which is included in the maxim not to degrade any other human being to serve as means for my ends«².

But at the same time respect for the other is also a principle of repulsion keeping individuals in distance from one another³. Respect for the other includes respect for the other's self-respect and thus includes respect for the otherness of the other whose inner self, whose motives, and feelings, whose personality he is allowed to keep to himself. Therefore even in authentic friendship between the other and me the attracting force of love must be balanced by the repulsive force of respect.

But already in Kant's time, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi revised this isolationism with respect to human individuals and pointed out the significance of relating to others for the development of human identity. In 1785 he wrote: »Without a Thou the I is impossible.«⁴ Early 20th century philosophy rediscovered the phenomenological significance of the I-Thou-relationship as one of mutual dependency. Hermann Cohen formulated the fundamental premise: »Only the discovery of the Thou leads me to the consciousness of my I.« And Cohen already saw parallels between the relationship of I and Thou and the relationship between God and human beings with God being the Thou, the other of humankind. Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, Hans Ehrenberg and others then elaborated this view further, pointing to the emphatic directedness of the I-Thou-relationship in which we are ourselves by way of being focused on the other.

Still, the fact that human individuals always find themselves in the midst of others is not only a prerequisite for the development of an individual identity; only too often is it also an obstacle, a source of constant pressure when others impose a certain view on us, while we strive for acknowledgment and recognition. Martin Heidegger pointed to this ambiguous character of the encounter with the other. In his analysis of existence (*Dasein*), he used the plural »the others« in reference to the fundamental dimension

¹ Kant 1785, 387-463, 429 (A 66f.).

² »... die Pflicht der Achtung meines Nächsten ist in der Maxime enthalten, keinen anderen Menschen bloß als Mittel zu meinen Zwecken abzuwürdigen« (Kant ²1798, 203-493, 450 (A 119)).

³ Cf. *ibid.*, 449 (A 117f).

⁴ Cf. Huizing 1998, 464.

of co-existence (*Mitdasein*). Alongside our acquaintance with the material things around us we are also confronted with non-material entities, i.e., the others, because everything around us appears as something that is something in the worlds of others as well. Insofar the material things are not only there, but are there as part and parcel of the worlds of others, the others are not co-existing with us in the sense that they inhabit our world the way material things do. When we encounter the others, we always encounter them as inhabiting their own world and thus existing similar to us. We file them not as things among things but as beings that have to project, to sketch out their existence according to their cares and concerns. Thus »the others« points to a category of ontological similarity: We are not different from the others, we are among the others.⁵ Therefore we do not relate to the others that co-exist with us as we do to material things – that is, not in a way of managing care (*Sorge* or *Besorgen*), but in a way of concern (*Fürsorge*).⁶

This concern can be twofold. It can supply for the needs and concerns of the other and hence stand in for him (or as Heidegger says, »leaping in for the other« [*einspringen*]) and take over for the other what he should take care of himself. Concern for the other in this sense can, as Heidegger puts it, throw the other out of position by dominating the other and making him dependent.⁷ This is the way one »takes care of,« for example, pets, children, the elderly, the sick and the injured.

But there can also be a concern for the other in the form of solicitude such that the other is empowered to take care of his existence on his own. And while concerns with regard to material things are linked with circumspection (*Umsicht*), such a care for the other is linked to respect and indulgence (*Rücksicht* and *Nachsicht*).⁸ It refrains from »leaping in« for the other or throwing him out of position. Therefore we have to distinguish between positive and negative interventions on behalf of the other – with the boundary line between true solicitude, which respects, even strengthens and fosters the other in his otherness, and dependency, which deprives the other of his existential care and concerns by depriving him of his own responsibility.

However, »the others« as a plurality to which the self also belongs is not just a collection of individuals but also a trans-subjective category. All the others, including myself, form humankind, the German abstract »Man«. I

⁵ Cf. Heidegger 1986, 118: »Die Anderen« besagt nicht soviel wie: der ganze Rest der Übrigen außer mir, aus dem sich das Ich heraushebt, die Anderen sind vielmehr die, von denen man selbst sich zumeist *nicht* unterscheidet, unter denen man auch ist«. Dieses »Auch« meint die Gleichheit des Seins als umsichtig-besorgendes In-der-Welt-sein«.

⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 121.

⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 122.

⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 123.

live my life as »one« does live one's life. Most of the time, we exist in a leveled everyday mode of existence characterized by ordinariness. The others become the public, and the public provides our primordial interpretations of existence. Thus the concept of the others as the abstract »Man« obscures and conceals existence as the task of being oneself by exculpating us from this task. But still this abstract category of the others is a prerequisite, a condition of possibility for any »authentic Being-one's-Self«, because this »does not rest upon an exceptional condition of the subject, a condition that has been detached from »Man«; it is rather *an existential modification of the »Man.*«⁹

Following Heidegger's existential analysis and combining it with Husserl's phenomenology, Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* deals with the question of how and on which grounds we relate to others. He praises Heidegger for understanding that the relation to others is a relation of being, of co-existence and not just an epistemological one. However, according to Sartre Heidegger falls short of realizing the other as the startling stranger. Starting from an analysis of the look Sartre points to the other as an essential dimension of our reflexive self-awareness. In a pre-reflexive state of mind, when we just look at others without being aware of ourselves being looked upon (Sartre's famous example is that of a man peeping through a keyhole), we can be completely absorbed in what we see and our ego does not feature as part of the scene. Only when we become aware that another is watching us or might be watching us is our ego evoked. Through the other I become aware of myself as a (potential) object of the other's look. But this objectification of my self is only possible if the other is regarded as a subject. So in the experience of the other's look my existence as a subject is objectified, while I have to acknowledge the other as a subject. I can only reject this objectification of my self by turning the tables on the other and looking back at him, thus turning the other into an object of my look such that the objectification of the other corresponds to an affirmation of my self as subject. This affirmation, however, is a failure, because through it I deny the other's selfhood and therefore deny that with respect to which I wanted to affirm myself.

Therefore relations between I and Thou, between ego and alter turn into terror, constantly alternating between repulsion and attraction. In his play for three actors »At closed doors,« Sartre later wrote the famous sentence: »*L'enfer, c'est les autres,*« usually translated as »Hell is other people.« The others need not even be present. Once we have realized the ambivalence of the others we cannot get rid of their look easily by fleeing from it, because it begins residing within us. In a sense everyone is his or her own other,

⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 130.

and we are condemned to the freedom of continuously choosing ourselves against the virtual or real other.

In contrast to Sartre, Emmanuel Lévinas interprets the phenomenology of the other in a more constructive way. He still stresses the disturbing difference and strangeness of the other. But he sees this as the remedy for the narcissistic trend of Western philosophy. In his view the history of Western philosophy is nothing but the attempt to overcome the other. The other, be it earth or heaven, the forces of nature, the things we deal with technically or culturally, or other human beings, that love and at the same time enslave us, all these are seen as obstacles and are conceptualized as something to be overcome and integrated into our egocentric and ratio-centric world-view. Thus »all philosophy is Ego-logy,«¹⁰ which tries to overcome and usurp the otherness of the other through the logos to reestablish the ego. Western philosophy is nothing but a perpetual return of an autonomous consciousness to itself. It returns to itself like Ulysses who through all his journeys only returned to his island of birth¹¹.

Lévinas intends to step out of this thinking by rediscovering the other as the radical difference to the ego that in a kind of epiphany is able to disrupt the context of egocentric being. The other is a mystery, an open question which cannot be subdued to the ego's will of power. The relation between me and the other is the only relation that is not intentional and not mediated, as is the case with our relations to material things. This mystery Lévinas identifies with the absolute, the transcendence which is beyond our reach. Even when the other becomes a Thou he continues to be a hidden »someone«, a third person, which Lévinas calls *illéité*¹² (from Latin *ille*: that one) which can be seen as an indicator for the absolute, for God.

Like Kierkegaard, Lévinas assumes that the ontological difference between ego and alter is preceded by the ethical difference.¹³ Instead of a model of mutual respect (cf. Kant) or mutual abhorrence (cf. Sartre) Lévinas argues for a model of absolute responsibility for the other. And it is not Sartre's look, but the face (*visage*) of the other that calls me to become responsible: »The epiphany of the face is ethical.«¹⁴ Face to face encounter with the other e.g. discloses the other's weakness and mortality and thus commands: »Thou shalt not kill!«¹⁵ We ought to care for the other who encounters us from beyond, from a transcendent dimension. He is the stranger who comes to me into my mundane, ego-centered existence demanding from me a »Here I am!«: »this »Here I am!« is the place through which the Infinite en-

¹⁰ Lévinas 1998, 189.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 211.

¹² Cf. *ibid.*, 229ff.

¹³ Cf. Lévinas 1986a, 201.

¹⁴ Lévinas 1980, 174: »L'épiphanie du visage est éthique.«

¹⁵ Cf. Lévinas 1986b, 66.

ters into language.«¹⁶ Here Lévinas refers to the commandment of the Torah »Thou shalt welcome the stranger in thy midst.« This relation face to face with the other is not a symmetrical relationship of mutual respect, exchange or communication but of ultimate care and concern. I am responsible for the other without knowing that the other will reciprocate. I am subject to the other; I am even, as Lévinas puts it, hostage to him. But in this non-symmetrical relationship Lévinas finds the meaning of being human. The encounter with the other as the stranger moves us to go out of ourselves. Thus not Ulysses, but Abraham who left his home and headed for the unknown should serve as paradigm for our existence.

I come to the conclusions of this first part of my argument. Phenomenological analysis reveals the ambivalence of our experience and notion of the other. Encountering the other is a prerequisite for becoming self-conscious subjects and agents because »without a Thou the I is impossible.« The others in plural as the abstract public (the German »Man«) denote the multitude of fellow human beings with whom we share a common world. Insofar as this constitutes public space and self-evident modes of ordinary existence, this kind of co-existence provides the starting point for our everyday life as well as it conceals and obscures the existential dimension of life by providing unquestioned modes of existence. Heidegger points to the difference between a care for the needs of others that leaps in for the other and a concern or solicitude for the other that is leaping ahead in order to promote the other's authentic cares and concerns and to liberate the other to authentic development. This does not necessarily suggest a *laissez-faire* ethics, as some commentators have criticized, that is conducive to an individualistic ethics of egocentric responsibility-to-self. But when Heidegger asserts that concern as solicitude is »based proximally and often exclusively upon what is a matter of common concern in such Being«¹⁷ he comes close to the danger of conceptualizing community from a perspective which remains egocentric. According to Heidegger we relate to others when we are devoted to a common affair, when out of an authentic concern we both engage for the same thing. But how can we engage with others with whom we do not share a common affair other than just being human?

Sartre and Lévinas, however, refer to the other as to the disrupting and disturbing stranger whose otherness is a challenge to the subject. While Sartre focuses on the other as an enemy who provokes my resistance against being objectified, Lévinas calls on us to deliver ourselves to the other who as the totally different other points to transcendence, to God. Thus we can identify in the other an existential dialectic between proximity and distance, between hidden otherness and revealing, demanding concreteness, between

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁷ Cf. Heidegger 1986, 122.

liberation and captivity. This relationship between the person and the other is mediated by a concrete encounter which culminates in the mutual look, in the face-to-face encounter.

For Christianity the biblical notion of neighbor reduces ambiguity and allows for spontaneity in concrete encounters. In its full sense it is able to guide and inspire the believer by mediating between general guiding principles and spontaneous acts, thus providing orientation in an ambiguous moral landscape. The central text in the New Testament to illustrate this point is the story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus tells this story in order to explain the Old Testament notion of neighbor. That fact might fuel the more general thesis that we inhabit moral landscapes through narratives. I will return to that later. But first I want to take a deeper look into the biblical traditions.

II. The Biblical Notion of the Neighbor

The Hebrew word for neighbor רֵעִי (re'î) has a wide range of meaning. It can designate a fellow human living in the neighborhood (Prov 3:29), a member of the own people (Exod 2:13), a friend (1 Sam 20:41) or a lover (Cant 5:16). It can be used as a pronoun in expressions like »speak to one another« (Gen 11:3). The basic meaning seems to be that of the fellow human with whom one is actually living together in a social community. It is sometimes narrowed down to the Israelite or member of the extended tribal family in opposition to the stranger, but the de facto range of the term very much depends on the context in which it is used. In the Ten Commandments according to Exod 20, e.g., רֵעִי (re'î) appears in the prohibition against bearing false witness against one's neighbor and against coveting the house, wife, servant, ox, ass, or any thing that belongs to him. The addressees of the Ten Commandments are mentioned in the prologue: all those whom God brought out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

The commandment »Love your neighbor as yourself« is found in Lev 19:18, a passage within the so-called holiness code (*Heiligkeitgesetz*). It is embedded in the Priestly Source which was most probably written for the late exile congregation, but the holiness code is usually considered to be an older independent collection of laws. Although it stresses that the people of Israel are separated from the rest of the world because Yahweh has chosen them and therefore they should be holy, it extends the law towards universality. Chapter 19 is a programmatic declaration for the late exile Israelites to strengthen their identity within diaspora. So רֵעִי (re'î) is presented as a parallel to בְּנֵי עַמְּךָ (benê `anımæka), i.e., »sons of your people: »You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself« (Lev 19:18). While a certain

community is addressed and distinguished from the גֵר (ger), the stranger or sojourner, only a few verses later the stranger is equated with the blood relative and included into the commandment of love: »The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt« (Lev 19:34).

The interpretation of the »as yourself« (קָמוֹכָא, kamôka) in »You shall love your neighbor/the stranger as yourself« is controversial. The translation »as yourself« is taken from the Septuagint and is traditionally interpreted as a command for self-love. But Martin Buber and Hermann Cohen, referring to Talmudic traditions, argued for a translation as »[who is] like yourself«, and recent investigation strengthens this view.¹⁸ The reason given for the commandment to love the stranger can then be seen as a parallel to the love command for the neighbor: You shall love your neighbor, because as a fellow Israelite he is like you, and you shall love the stranger, because he is like you in the sense that once you were a stranger, too. What the Israelites have in common with their neighbor is the social relationship. What they have in common with the stranger is the experience of foreignness and alienation. So already in the Old Testament we can identify a tendency to extend the love command in order to include any fellow human being with whom one shares fundamental situations of existence.

The Old Testament commandment of love for one's neighbor in the Septuagint version of Lev 19:18b is cited 11 times in the New Testament. It appears twice in Paul (Rom 13:9; Gal 5:14) as the fulfillment of the whole law, once similarly in James as the »Royal law« (James 2:8). In the synoptic tradition, it is cited in Mark 12 and parallels (Matt 22:39; Luke 10:27) linked with the commandment of love for God. When in Matt 19:19 the young rich man asks Jesus what to do to attain eternal life, Jesus' answer lists some of the Ten Commandments together with the commandment of love for the neighbor. In the sixth antithesis of Jesus' sermon on the mount (Matt 6:43ff), the commandment of love for the neighbor is, in contrast to the Old Testament text, linked with an alleged and otherwise unknown commandment of hate for the enemy and contrasted with Jesus' commandment of love for the enemy. Although indeed the Old Testament as well as the rabbinic exegesis didn't know a commandment of love for the enemy, we already pointed to the fact that the tendency is towards an inclusion of human beings as such. Thus Jesus' commandment of love for the enemy can be seen as a consequential sequel and radicalization of the Old Testament tradition rather than an antithesis to it.

I already mentioned that Jesus united into a single precept the commandment of love for God according to Deut 6:5 and the commandment of love for one's neighbor and saw in the combination of these two com-

¹⁸ Cf. Schüle 2001, 515-534.

mandments the fulfillment of God's will as a whole. In all three synoptic gospels, this teaching is embedded into a story in which Jesus has to answer the Pharisees' legalistic question about the greatest commandment. Jesus sees the whole Mosaic Law summoned up in the command to love God as well as one's neighbor and consequently refused to discuss a hierarchy of single commandments. In Luke's version of the story (Luke 10:25–37), the double command of love is cited by the asking Pharisee, a scholar of law. Then the story continues in such a way that the scholar of law tries to put Jesus to the test and asks for a definition of neighbor apparently in order to avoid the obvious claim speaking out of Jesus' words. Jesus answers with the story of the Good Samaritan: A man had fallen victim to robbers on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho and had been beaten half to death. A priest and a Levite who came upon the wounded man passed by on the other side, but the Samaritan felt compassion for the victim, took care of his needs, and rescued him. Jesus then ends his story by asking back: »Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?« Thus he rejects the question of the scholar of law by turning the question for a definition of the *object* of love into a call to action for the questioner as a *subject* of love, and he uncovers the hidden attempt of the scholar of law to evade the claim of the love command.

A closer look at this story reveals that the Greek verb *σπλαγχνίζομαι* (to be moved with pity or compassion) plays a central role in it. It is derived from the noun *σπλάγχνα*, which literally means the inward parts of the body, the entrails, and which like the heart refer to the innermost self as the seat of feelings and affections. Thus *σπλαγχνίζομαι* indicates feelings and affections that go along with intense bodily states – gut feelings, so to speak. Except for our story and other parables it is, astonishingly enough, only used with Jesus as subject. And as in the story of the Good Samaritan, it most often describes Jesus' emotional response to his view of human misery: »Seeing the people, he felt compassion for them ...« (Matt 9:36). And before the feeding of the four thousand it even appears in direct speech: »I feel compassion for the people ...«. The Synoptic gospels might have used this verb with this Christological exclusiveness because in the Septuagint it expresses God's mercy¹⁹, but it might also reflect the language use of the historic Jesus. However, when Jesus saw the people and single human beings in need, when he encountered their misery he is depicted as being moved in his innermost self and thus representing the heart, the innermost self of God.

There is also another significant point in this context. Jesus never approached the sick and needy as sinners who have been punished for their sin. Although the gospel sees in Jesus' wondrous deeds the breaking of the

¹⁹ Cf. Köster 1964, 548–559, 553.

power of sin, Jesus never demanded a confession of sin in order to then free the repentant sinner from the punishment of sin, i.e., his or her disease. Jesus feels pity for the sick and needy as human beings who are distorted in their humanity. Jesus does not deal with the reasons for their misery, but with the misery itself.²⁰

All this applies to the Good Samaritan, too. He is moved with compassion by the sight of the needy the same way as Jesus himself is moved. And he turns towards the victim unconditionally and simply does his best to fulfill the man's immediate and urgent needs. He does not ask about reasons, doubts, and obstacles. He as a Samaritan is not obliged by natural bonds to help a citizen of the Judean homeland. The Samaritan – and that is apparently one of the salient points in Jesus' parable – is not related to the Jewish victim. »Jews have no dealings with Samaritans,« states an explanatory remark in John 4:9. However, he is not a Christological figure, and Jesus calls on the scholar of law to go and do the same.

There are at least five points with regard to this story which are important for the New Testament notion of neighbor. 1. The relationship of the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan to the one who has fallen victim to the robbers is a matter of *view*. Each of them came and saw the victim lying on the roadside, but only one was moved with compassion. 2. This relationship has a *spatial component* as is indicated by the term in question: neighbor. In verse 36, when Jesus ends the story by asking the scholar of law who of the three was neighbor to the robbers' victim, »neighbor« (πλησίον) is used without the definite article, singularly in the New Testament.²¹ This emphasizes the spatial dimension since the word is in this form identical with the adverb »near.«²² And the reactions of the three agents in this story have a spatial component as well. For the reaction of the priest and the Levite the rare verb ἀρτίπαρέρχομαι is used which means »to pass onto the other side.« The reaction of the Samaritan is just the opposite. He steps towards the victim: προσέρχομαι. 3. What changes the view of the Samaritan so that he turns towards the victim is not the result of a reflexive act of moral reasoning but part of a *spontaneous act impelled by an affective move*. He is simply moved by the sight and fate of the victim and does the necessary things to do in

²⁰ Cf. for the Johannine tradition also John 9:2f., where Jesus is confronted with a man born blind and is asked by his disciples: »Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?« Jesus answered, »It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.« The Christian concept and praxis of repentance in the Western churches did not always adequately reflect the immediate and unconditional affirmation of help for the destitute and needy human being.

²¹ In the question of the scholar of law in verse 29 it appears with a prefixed possessive pronoun.

²² Cf. Haacker ²1992, 265–269, 268.

this situation. 4. Jesus refuses to give the definition for neighbor which the scholar of law had asked him to give, but tells a *story*. And he not only tells a story but also refuses to draw a moral of the story that would provide such a definition. Being one's neighbor is not a matter of definition and attributes on the side of the object of love, but a matter of relation and action on the side of the subject of love. One *is* not the neighbor of another; one *becomes* his or her neighbor. This leaves one last point to be made. 5. The parallels between the Good Samaritan and Jesus, as well as the identification of Jesus with God and God's will in the Synoptic traditions, are obvious. As the Samaritan is presented as a role model for the scholar of law and all the story's listeners, Jesus is depicted throughout the gospels as the role model for all potential good Samaritans. And at the same time Jesus effectuates nothing but the will and power of God. Thus we have a kind of *gradual representation* of the original and archetypical compassion of God with creation in the compassion of Jesus with the sick and needy which is again represented in the compassion and love between a compassionate human being and his or her neighbor.

III. The Other as Neighbor: Theological Interpretations

Christian theology has tried to reconstruct and conceptualize the biblical notion of the neighbor. The crucial questions that have to be dealt with can be identified if we contrast two important conceptions: Thomas Aquinas' concept of love and compassion in relation to God and the neighbor and Martin Luther's interpretation of the biblical love command. In the last section, we will draw final conclusions from a contemporary theological perspective.

III.1 The Thomist Concept of the Neighbor

Aquinas' concept of neighbor refers to Aristotelian ethics. As we have seen, the encounter with the other is embedded in a moral landscape of proximity and distance. The Aristotelian emotion of compassion refers to proximity as well. In his Rhetoric, Aristotle defines pity or compassion as »a kind of pain excited by the sight of evil, deadly or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it; an evil which one might expect to come upon himself or one of his friends, and all that when it seems near (καὶ τοῦτο πλησίον φαίνεται).«²³ Compassion is triggered when evil of another comes into sight and seems to be near (πλησίον). This proximity is established through closeness »in age, character, disposition, social standing, or birth; for in all these cases it appears more likely that the same misfortune may befall

²³ Rhetoric II,8,2 (1385b) (Aristotle 1991, 224f.).

us also.« Thus Aristotle applies »the general principle that what we fear for ourselves excites our pity when it happens to others.«²⁴

Now Aquinas defines pity (*miser cordia*) in accordance to Aristotle as compassion with the misery of the other (*compassio super miseria aliena*).²⁵ However, referring to the biblical love commandment, he explains the fact that the compassionate takes the misery of the other as his own as a result of love for one's neighbor and not as a result of the fear that what happens to the other might also happen to him. For Aquinas²⁶ the proximity of the neighbor is regulated by those principles which are fundamental for love and charity: The order in things loved out of charity must be in accordance with the first principle of love, which is God alone.²⁷ We find a tendency in us to move towards God and receive from God all we need.

In the tradition of Augustine, Aquinas interprets the biblical love command of Leviticus »Love your neighbor *as yourself*« as implying and even demanding natural self-love: »Well ordered self-love, whereby man desires a fitting good for himself,²⁸ is right and natural.«²⁹ Human self-love, ultimately directed towards God, provides nothing less than the order and measure of human love at large; it is the principle of friendship: »just as unity is the principle of union, so the love with which a man loves himself is the form and root of friendship.«³⁰

Love and charity are virtues, and they come in different degrees. The first and predominant love is born of our neediness, out of which we love God as the giver of all goods. We love our neighbor in accordance with his relation with God. Therefore love for God and love for our neighbor are essentially the same: »the aspect under which our neighbor is to be loved, is God, since what we ought to love in our neighbor is that he may be in God. Hence it is clear that it is specifically the same act whereby we love God, and whereby we love our neighbor.«³¹

The degrees of a Christian's love for the neighbor should correspond to the neighbor's relation to God. »Therefore the specific diversity of the love which is in accordance with charity, as regards the love of our neighbor, depends on his relation to God, so that, out of charity, we should wish a greater good to one who is nearer to God.«³² On the other hand we love those who are more closely united to us with more intense affection, espe-

²⁴ Rhetoric II,8,13 (1386a) (*ibid.*, 228f., translation slightly changed).

²⁵ S.th., II-II, q. 30 a. 2 c. (Aquinas 1980b, 567).

²⁶ For the following cf. Holl 1948, 155–287, especially 161ff.

²⁷ S.th. II-II, q. 26, a. 1, c. (Aquinas 1980b, 560).

²⁸ I retain the male nouns and gendered pronouns used in the original.

²⁹ S.th. I-II, q. 77, a. 4, ad 1. (Aquinas 1980b, 458).

³⁰ S.th. II-II, q. 25, a. 4, c. (*ibid.*, 558).

³¹ S.th. II-II, q. 25, a. 1, c. (*ibid.*, 557).

³² S.th. II-II, q. 26, a. 7, c. (*ibid.*, 561).

cially those who are connected with us by their natural origin; and we love them also in more and varying ways because we are related to them in many respects. »The degrees of love may be measured from two standpoints. First, from that of the object. On this respect the better a thing is, and the more like to God, the more is it to be loved ... Secondly, the degrees of love may be measured from the standpoint of the lover, and in this respect a man loves more that which is more closely connected with him.«³³

Now compassion as an element of our love for the neighbor is closely linked to the sight of evil. It is – and here Aquinas refers to Aristotle again – a kind of pain which is totally against the human will: »*contra totam voluntatem*.« Pity is »the contrary of which man desires naturally«³⁴, it is against the free will of every human being, and it is something human beings detest in its very cause, so that we feel even more pain when one suffers undeservedly. Aquinas also agrees with Aristotle that pity comes through identifying with the sufferer so that one looks upon another's distress as one's own. This identification may come about in two ways, »through union of the affections, which is the effect of love« or »through real union« when we realize for ourselves the possibility of suffering in the same way. That explains why young and happy people pity less than old and wise who see themselves nearer to suffering. So Aquinas can conclude: »The reason for loving is indicated in the word »neighbor,« because the reason why we ought to love others out of charity is because they are nigh to us, both as to the natural image of God, and as to the capacity for glory.«³⁵

Now insofar as this compassion for others is a feeling denoting a movement of the sensitive appetite (*motus appetitus sensitivi*)³⁶, it is simply a passion, but not a virtue. Only when it becomes a movement of the intellectual appetite as well (*motus appetitus intellectivi*) the lower movement of the sensitive appetite can be regulated by reason (*secundum rationem regulatus*). Only then can compassion become a virtue, i.e., an acquired habit. As emotion compassion is neither a judgment nor an assent or an act of volition. We can make ourselves *act* morally, we can perform *acts* of charity, but we cannot make ourselves *feel* sympathy or compassion. Therefore for Aquinas compassion is not a precondition of charity, but an effect. And because love or charity as the union between God and man it is the end of all creation, »it is charity which directs the acts of all other virtues to the last end, and which, consequently, also gives the form to all other acts of virtue: and it is precisely in this sense that charity is called the form of the virtues.«³⁷

³³ S.th. II-II, q. 26, a. 9, c. (ibid., 562).

³⁴ S.th. II-II, q. 30, a. 1, c. (ibid., 567).

³⁵ S.th. II-II, q. 44, a. 7, c. (ibid., 585).

³⁶ S.th. II-II, q. 30, a. 3, c. (ibid., 567).

³⁷ S.th. II-II, q. 23, a. 8, c. (ibid., 554).

Compassion or pity is the other side of love or charity. We have to love what is above us because love is the quest for unity and ultimately we strive towards union with God. Since God has no one who stands above, God only gives and thus shows mercy to those who are beneath. And insofar we love God out of our natural self-love and want to realize our union with God, we shall become like God – that is, we shall supply the needs of those who are beneath us and show mercy. And although »it is better to be united to that which is above than to supply the defect of that which is beneath«³⁸, charity and compassion belong together as complementary aspirations within the same context. The effect of compassion as a habit is a growing connaturality between God who is love itself and human beings who are more and more formed by love,³⁹ because every love or affection is based upon a common nature which the lover and the beloved share and which induces a striving towards union between the two.⁴⁰

Aquinas' answer to the question how the moral landscape of proximity to and distance from our fellow human beings is shaped takes God and his love or charity as the measure and scale. We are linked to God and to our fellow human beings through the connaturality of being aligned towards God; and thus we live and exist by the love of God to whom we tend in every authentic aspiration. This field of attraction through charity is superposed on the natural bonds of love between, for example, families, relatives and compatriots so that once again the Thomist maxim is applied: »Grace does not destroy the nature of a thing, but perfects it: *gratia non tollit naturam sed perfecit.*«⁴¹

III.2 Martin Luther on the Neighbor

In contrast to Aquinas, Martin Luther has interpreted the biblical love command as independent of any religious or moral category. Luther exhorts not to establish any inappropriate distinctions regarding human individuals. For a Christian a wicked and evil person should not be regarded differently than someone who is devout and does good to others.⁴² Authentic Christian love for the neighbor does not draw its motive and strength from the other and his or her attributes and characteristics. The motive and strength of au-

³⁸ S.th. II-II, q. 30, a. 4, c. (ibid., 567f.).

³⁹ S.th. II-II, q. 45, a. 2, c. (ibid., 585): »... compassio sive connaturalitas ad res divinas fit per caritatem.«

⁴⁰ S.th. I-II, q. 32, a. 3, ad 3. (ibid., 398): »amor est quaedam unio vel connaturalitas amantis ad amatum.«

⁴¹ Cf. S.th. I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2; cf. also I, q. 62, a. 7 (ibid., 186. 274); Sup. Sent., lib. 2, d. 9, q. 1, a. 8, arg. 3 (Aquinas 1980a, 152) and many other places.

⁴² »... das du nicht ein sonderlich falsche unterscheid der person machest noch jn anders ansihest denn einen andern, der da from ist und dir guts thut« (WA 36, 359,42-360,2 [Luther 1532]).

thentic Christian love come from within the heart of the believer and turn the believer towards anybody who is in need. And insofar Christian love is directed toward the need of the other, the love command is not simply superposed on natural bonds, but should transcend them. So it is rather the enemy and evildoer whom the Christian should love in many ways because in him one can see a multitude of needs, including spiritual needs and the need of salvation.⁴³ The central notion that structures the moral landscape in Luther's sense are not the different levels of proximity to and distance from God with the common goal of drawing nearer to him but the fundamental experience of the sinner's justification. In the act of justification, there is no equivalence between God's grace and the sinner's worthiness. God's love does not find its motive and strength in the attributes and characteristics of the sinner. Luther's maxim in this respect can be found in the 28th thesis of his Heidelberg Disputation: »The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it ... Therefore sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive.«⁴⁴

Therefore a Christian should serve his neighbor as Christ has served him; he should become Christ for his neighbor⁴⁵ and should care for his neighbor's needs freely and gratis. Thus the freedom of a Christian and the obligation towards the neighbor correspond, or to cite the end of Luther's »On the Freedom of a Christian«: »We conclude therefore that a Christian man does not live in himself, but in Christ, and in his neighbor, or else is no Christian; in Christ by faith, in his neighbor by love. By faith he is carried upwards above himself to God, and by love he sinks back below himself to his neighbor, still always abiding in God and His love.«⁴⁶

This is not just an intellectual insight; it always comprises a transmutation of the affective constitution of the believer: »the soul is converted towards God through intellect and affection.«⁴⁷ Consequently Luther does not see the Holy Scripture as a sourcebook of information about God and the neighbor but as a living word whose reading is an exercise leading into a rich realm of emotions and experiences: nothing grants understanding and

⁴³ »Da gehet sie [die Liebe] reichlich eraus und jderman offen, der jr bedarff, und trifft beide, gute und boese, freund und feind, Ja den feinden wol allermeist bereit, als die es mehr beduerffen, das ich jn helffe von jrem jamer und sunden und sonderlich jnn dem hoehesten gut, das ich fur sie bitte und alles thue, was ich vermag, das sie auch from, von sunden und Teuffel erloeset moegen werden« (ibid., 360,17-22).

⁴⁴ WA 1, 365,2.11f. (Luther 1518): »Amor Dei non invenit sed creat suum diligibile ... Ideo enim peccatores sunt pulchri, quia diliguntur, non ideo diliguntur, quia sunt pulchri«.

⁴⁵ Cf. WA 7, 35 (Luther 1520).

⁴⁶ Ibid., 38.

⁴⁷ WA 3, 151,5f. (Luther 1513-16): »Anima per intellectum et affectum ad deum conversa ...«

meaning [of the biblical text] other than affection and experience.⁴⁸ One has to read a Psalm verse by verse in such a way as to feel the affections included in the text.⁴⁹ Through the gospel and its proclamation the Holy Spirit can change the reader and listener. This transmutation affects experience, sentiment and the affections: »No one can receive from the Holy Spirit without experiencing, sensing and feeling it, and through this experience the Holy Spirit teaches as in his own school.«⁵⁰

Therefore Luther sees the commonality between the Christian and the neighbor not in their connaturality with God, but in their common status before God. Both the Christian and the suffering neighbor are God's creatures, for whom Christ came and suffered and whom he reconciled with God. Love for the neighbor is not based on a commonality of nature but on an equivalence of relations. God's love is free and not dependent on any precondition on the side of the justified sinner other than his or her neediness and poverty. This experience puts all ranks, all differences, and physical bonds between human beings into perspective: They constitute our humanity, and insofar as our humanity is damaged they are against God's intentions. But they do not qualify before God. Consequently the others as neighbors are neither qualified by their attributes, nor are they related to me in proportion to their God-likeness. They are seen, so to speak, in their naked human neediness.

III.3 Compassion for the neighbor: Concluding Remarks

As we have seen, the other is an ambiguous category. To see the other as neighbor requires a *determination of view* that is able to overcome the antagonism of human relations. Such a change results in a disposition towards spontaneous and emotional moves which decide the antagonism of repulsion and attraction in favor of attraction and solidarity so that the subject turns towards the other. Compassion as an emotional move in this sense is not determined and triggered by a sufficient set of properties ascribed to facts and states of affairs. It is not a judgment which after a thorough analysis could be reduced to its epistemic content. Compassion is not a logical inference, and it is not derived from a set of implicit propositional axioms or truths. It is an intuitive evaluation of complex situations and persons involved, seen in a certain light. Thus it depends on images and stories which can form and structure the experience of a person.

⁴⁸ WA 5, 210,25f.: »Intellectum et sensum non dat nisi ipse affectus et experientia.«

⁴⁹ Ibid., 47,2f.: »... didiceris affectibus vivum et spirantem facere.«

⁵⁰ »Niemand kansz aber von dem heiligenn geist habenn, er erfaresz, vorsuchs und empfinds denn, unnd yn der selben erfahrung leret der heylyl geyst alsz ynn seiner eygenen schule, auszer wilcher wirt nichts geleret, denn nur schein unnd geschwet.« (WA 7, 546,26–29 [Luther 1521]). Cf. WA.TR 1, 427,22f.: »Die schrifft verstehet kein mensch ... nisi experiatur.«

The Christian notion of love for the neighbor is rooted in transforming experiences, the experiences of faith and forgiveness. The central experience of Christian faith is God's compassion for the sinner and the effective experience of justification which is basically an experience of liberation and relief: relief from sin, from binding and enslaving forces that tend to imprison the sinner in the ambiguities of human existence, and freedom for a new structure of relationships.

Such an experience is not an experience among others, is not just another element in the flow of changing mental and emotional states, but it is a rearrangement of the disposition of a person,⁵¹ her passions and concerns. Everything a person has experienced is affected, because it appears in a new light or from a new perspective. Everything, or at least a large part of what supplied the individual personhood, undergoes a transformative experience and the moral landscape of a person's dispositions towards herself, others and her interaction with them will be rearranged. Such a transforming experience can not be brought forth by communicating propositional information. It is a process of enlightenment and disclosure which constitutes an existential certitude and takes hold of the whole person. Consequently the biblical scriptures do not expose propositional doctrines, but are centered around stories and narratives: the stories of creation, of the multitude of biblical figures, the story of Israel, the story of Jesus, who himself told narratives and parables to illustrate the kingdom of God. To be transformed by recognizing that one's own existence is involved in these stories and opened towards new possibilities of relationships, includes a complex interplay of concepts, emotions and convictions as well as second order categories like sensitivity, attention, views of one self and of others.

What Luther saw most clearly, and the respect in which he deviates significantly from the Aristotelian and scholastic tradition, is that love for the neighbor is grounded not in a deficit but in a *positive experience*. Aristotelian ethics is founded on an anthropology of desire and ambition, a concept that became important for Aquinas' doctrine of grace, which he developed as an ethics of virtues. Love is the desire for a missing good. Love for God is the desire and ambition for union with God, self-love is the desire and ambition to meet this demand, and love of the neighbor established in virtues is the means by which we direct our desire and ambition toward the love of God. Luther points to the fact that spontaneous love that allows for the view of the other as neighbor cannot be founded on a desire or ambition born out of a deficit but only on the overwhelming and reassuring experience of divine love in which we participate.

⁵¹ Cf. Heidegger's use of the German term »Gestimmsein« (attunement) in: Heidegger 1986, 134ff.

However, to love one's neighbor is a Christian *commandment*. It is neither a declarative statement nor a wish. It is a task to be fulfilled, and it is a fundamental Christian conviction that, although love for the neighbor is not the natural state of human beings, it lies in the range of human existence. But it does not demand something which is an alien or superposed adjunct to the experience of faith. It is a commandment in the sense that it reminds us of something which in the light of God's love should be self-evident. Without the transformation of faith, however, the commandment in itself cannot bring into effect what it demands. Still it appeals to fundamental human experiences like the fact that all human beings are »near« to each other in that their existence is deeply dependent on the loving care of others. And as a commandment which addresses us as agents it calls for self-reflection. If that were impossible, we would be imprisoned in the present moment and its spontaneous momentum.⁵²

As such a reminder the love command tends towards long term effects. Insofar as the experience of faith is an experience which transforms existence, it aims at continuity and habituation. The Christian term for this is spiritual growth. Although Luther is fully aware of the fact that the Christian believer is always on the way and that growth is a fundamental dimension of Christian life, he is in danger (as are some strands of later Lutheranism) of losing the aspect of *long term behavior within actual social relationships* which is central to the Aristotelian and scholastic ethics of virtue. In central texts where Luther speaks about love for the neighbor, he immediately explains it in terms of individual vocational duties⁵³: The servant fulfills the love command by doing his duty faithfully, while the Lord does the same by being a just and merciful Lord. But the transformational dimension of the Christian love command is embedded into communities and must not be isolated from social and political dimensions. To see the other as neighbor is incompatible with certain social and political conditions, and it aims at transforming them by referring to the existential likeness of human beings.

Phenomenological analysis of the ambiguities of the I-Thou-relationship demands us to keep in mind that in fact we often enough fall short of love for the other and see in him or her the obstacle rather than the neighbor. And it is equally true that often enough the circumstances are such that love seems impossible and is absorbed by aggression, violence and injustice. We live in a complicated world in which the concern for the other is often in conflict with other values, social relations or political conditions. And often the correspondence between need and supply is not as clear-cut as it is in the story of the Good Samaritan. Physical and spiritual needs of human be-

⁵² Cf. Nagel 1978.

⁵³ Cf. WA 6, 186ff. (Luther 1532).

ings can be in conflict with each other; to get rid of one evil might evoke an even greater one; to take care of someone's needs and release her from life's challenges might fuel her self-pity and hinder her maturation; and the ambition to help everybody might turn into an obsession that hinders the joy of life for all parties involved.

Starting from this phenomenology of the love of one's neighbor we can extend it to provisional considerations about Jesus' radical command of love for one's enemies (Matt 5:44 and Luke 6:35). Significantly this command does not refer to concrete individuals, but refers to enemies as well as to the addressees of the command as groups. Therefore it should not be understood as a command of individual ethics which demands a certain emotional disposition towards hostile individuals but as a call for the Christian community to overcome enmity. The context of the command of love for enemies shows different aspects of possible required actions: refraining from violence and revenge, showing gentleness and practicing intercession for enemies in order to interrupt the circle of enmity. For this command Jesus argues on strictly theological grounds and does not refer to any shared human likeness. Only from an eschatological perspective in which God has broken the power of evil does love for enemies find a plausible rationale. It cannot as such be generalized, though some prudential rules can be deduced, such as the critique of threatening stereotypes and roots of enmity (*Feindbilder*) or strategies of de-escalation and appeasement. But the love of enemies as such might be limited to emblematic actions which owe their possibility to faith in God's ultimate victory.

The command of love for the neighbor, however, calls us to work out compassion for the other into a persistent effort and ongoing exercise, thus elaborating our character traits. On the other hand the characteristics of individual personal encounters as well as the conditions of our lives and of this world do not allow for turning love into a technique and the notion of neighbor into a stereotype. What sympathy for the other shares with many other aspects of spiritual life is the ongoing dialectic between coherence and discontinuity. There is no linear way of a pilgrim's progress but a lifelong process of learning which includes spiritual affliction, trial and temptation when God and his commandment intersect with our existence within our world. Consequently the transforming experience of faith is no single incident, but opens up an ongoing process of growth and ever new beginnings. The biblical concept of neighbor urges us to discriminate and identify issues of lasting importance and issues of momentary urgency⁵⁴ and thus to correlate questions of long term behavior and of social justice with

⁵⁴ For this distinction cf. Ritschl 1987, pass.

sensitivity for present challenges and spontaneous responses in concrete encounters.

Love and compassion must therefore be embedded into the famous triad of Paul, who linked love to faith and hope (1Cor 13:13) and thus integrated it into our temporal existence. *Faith* is confidence recollecting of what God has done for us and others, *hope* is the confident expectation of what God will provide, and *love* is attentive presence of mind which realizes our Christian existence. The scholar's question, »Who is my neighbor?« must always be answered anew, not despite, but because of Jesus' answer to it in the story of the Samaritan. There is no moral imperative that guarantees the fulfillment of the love command. It is a mission and a call before it is a prescription or a calculus. Therefore we need narratives, we need role models, we need historically and culturally differentiated conceptions of love in order to develop our mission and calling today.

As a consequence the temporal, diachronic dimension of the love command is to be supplemented by the synchronic dimension of the *community of believers*. Collective remembrance of God's compassion and its liturgical celebration, mutual conversation and consolation, the common return to the sources of faith: all that contributes to the development of confidence and self-assurance in dealing with others. Communities provide space and time to practice compassion, to be exposed to pain and suffering as well as to experience tolerance, forgiveness and acceptance.⁵⁵ It is an important challenge for Christian churches and communities in our pluralist societies to become places where individual as well as communal Christian identities can be formed in a fashion which deals with otherness in a fruitful and constructive way which goes beyond criteria of utility. There are tendencies in our societies to level significant differences, declare them stereotypes of individual expression and therefore irrelevant. There seem to be strong centrifugal forces that separate cultures, sub-cultures and individuals according to lifestyles, belief-systems, and value-orientations. In our post-modern, pluralist societies we can hardly identify tendencies towards integration, shared consensus and common values other than those fashionable trends promoted by the mass media and a globalized economy. In such a setting a Christian *oikumene*, a trans-cultural *ecumenical movement* within an inter-religious setting might be a source of inspiration where Christians can work on spiritual resources, experiences and virtues which are able to promote views of the other as neighbor, transcending differences without denying them.

⁵⁵ Cf. Shults 2006, 168ff.

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