openDemocracy
free thinking for the world

Published on open Democracy News Analysis (http://www.opendemocracy.net)

The neighbor in the self

By James R Mensch,
Created 2008-08-28 11:05

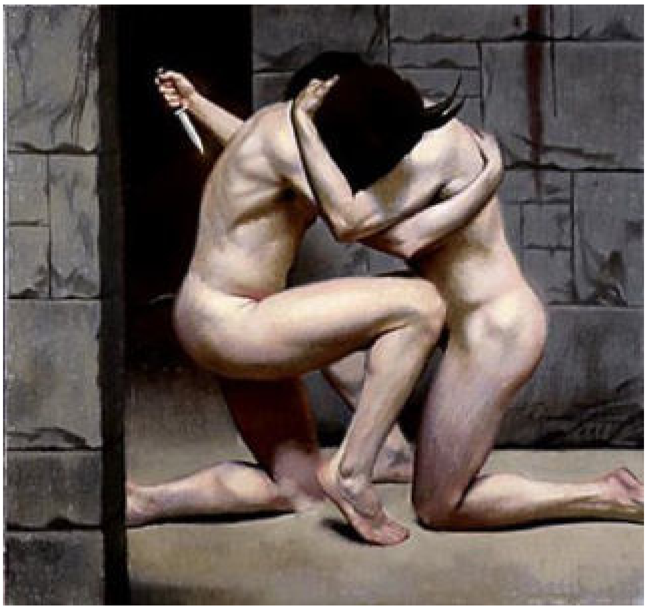
There is a famous passage in the Gospels, where a lawyer questions Jesus with regard to the command to love God with one's whole heart and to love ones neighbour `as oneself.' The lawyer asks, 'And who is my neighbour?' (Luke 10:2 [1]). Is he someone who lives close by or a co-religionist or is he a stranger, a follower of a different faith as Jesus suggests by answering with the parable of the good Samaritan? The 'religions of the book [2],' Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, have difficulties answering this question. As their respective histories show, they all manifest a double potential. They show themselves capable of promoting acts of love and extreme self-sacrifice in their followers. But they also have histories marked by religiously motivated struggles, intolerance and acts of brutality. What is the root of this double potential? How can they promote both love and violence?

Recent history, from the terrorist acts inspired by Islamic fundamentalism to the actions of the religiously motivated settlers on the West Bank all bear witness to religion's negative potential. Christianity, in its complicity and indifferent to the fate of the Jews in the Shoah, also provides an example. Despite its focus on charity and loving one's neighbour, it has, historically, often violated its these teachings in its attempts to preserve the purity of its doctrines. Both in its religious wars and in its persecutions of sects deemed heretical, its attempts to protect itself have contradicted the beliefs that most distinguish it.

openDemocracy's collection of material relating to Religion and Difference is here. [3]

Tina Beattie's "The dark (k)night of a postmodern world [3]" reflects on the notion of the other in Christopher Nolan's *Batman*.

Derrida, reflecting on these facts, saw religion as a victim of an 'autoimmune reaction [4].' In biology, this term refers to the body's turning its immune reaction on itself. Systems designed to protect the body to immunize it from biological attacks from without turn inward attacking its own structures. As Derrida observes, religion can suffer this fate in its attempts to preserve itself. Doing so, it fails to grasp its own self-identity. Like the body suffering the autoimmune reaction, it takes as 'other' what is actually part of itself.



Courtesy of Harvey Dinnerstein and Frey Norris Gallery [5]

All the religions of the book manifest this phenomenon. The violence of their reactions is, in fact, a measure of 'the other' they exclude being, in fact, part of their self-identity. Thus, the Judaism inherent in Christianity has often led to anti-Semitic reactions. The same holds for the Christian component of Islam, Christians being regarded as 'infidels' by Muslims. It also holds for the Catholic component of Protestantism. Judaism's reactions to the religions that preceded it in Canaan can also be added to this list.

In each case, we seem to have an instance of Jacques Lacan [6]'s doctrine that the 'unconscious' that aspect of myself I cannot recognize is 'the censored chapter of my history.' This refusal does not just result in the repression of the other. Insofar as the other is part of my identity, it results in a distorted self-knowledge. In Lacan's words, this self-knowledge is marred by 'the distortions necessitated by the linking of the adulterated chapter to the chapters surrounding it.'

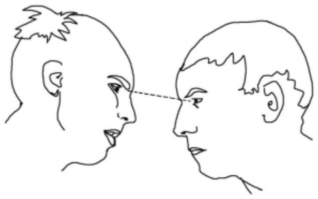
The positive potential comes from a fact that all three religions of the book believe in a transcendent [7], creator God. Such a God exists before the world he creates. This means not just that he is independent of it, but also that he inherently transcends all definitions taken from its terms. Not being of the world, he cannot be defined by it. As all three see mankind as the `image' of God, they necessarily acknowledge, each in its own way, an analogous transcendence of individuals. This means that human beings cannot be completely defined. There is something within them that escapes all categorization in worldly terms. The result of this aspect of religion is a *radical openness*to who counts as a neighbour. This is because, in his identity with the divine, no human being can be stereotyped. One cannot, for example, say that women, children, slaves, people of different races or colour do not, as such, bear this image. In the ancient world, the result this view was a solidarity that led to the abolition of infanticide. A parallel impulse led to the religious agitation against slavery in 19thcentury Britain and the United States.

This very transcendence is the common root of the double potential of the religions in question. Religious selfhood, viewed in terms of its point of contact with the divine, is necessarily indefinable. The openness this leads to is the very thing that makes these religions prone to the autoimmune reaction. This is because an identity that cannot be pinned down can be felt as threatened. The unease it provokes is a constant temptation to define it negatively in terms of what it excludes. Given that each of the religions of the book emerged from its predecessors through a struggle to define itself as distinct, the excluded `other' naturally tends to be such predecessors. Insofar as each religion's history is also marked by struggles with its successors, they too can function as this `other.'

This point is applicable not just to these religions but also to the modern secular states that have succeeded them in the West. We need not adopt Hegel's dictum [8], `The state is founded on religion,' to see that our modern conception of civil rights has historical antecedents that reach back to our religious past. As a number of scholars have argued, behind the limitations of state power that are embodied in such rights is the thought that human nature involves a certain transcendence. The self's inviolability with regard to state power is a function of the transcendence implicit in its point of contact with the divine. Similarly, the openness to the other that characterizes genuine political debate points back to the radical openness of religion as to who is to count as a neighbour.

The state's inability to acknowledge these facts can be traced to the struggles by which it defined itself as modern and secular. The earliest impulses for the formation of its `secular paradigm' came from the religious conflicts that marked the Reformation. The exhaustion resulting from the Thirty Years War and other similar conflicts led to the issuing of various `edicts of tolerance. [9]' Their intended aim was to permit the practice of sects that were distinct from the officially approved religions. Indirectly, however, they led to the exclusion of religion from the secular sphere. The developing plurality of religious practices led to the belief that none could command the public, official realm. With this came the impulse to consider this realm as a separate sphere, one conceived in opposition to the different religious practices. The secular paradigm that developed, thus, included a withdrawal of the religious consciousness into the strictly private realm. Correspondingly, the state defined itself in opposition to this consciousness. Its guiding sentiment was that `religion and politics do not mix.' Any attempt to introduce religion into politics was viewed, at best, as misguided. At worst, it was considered as undermining the foundations of the modern secular state, an undermining that could ultimately lead to the religious conflicts that marked the birth of the secular period.

The limitations of this paradigm does not just show themselves in specific areas such as is the ongoing and, apparently, irresolvable debates on how Europe should come to terms with its Islamic minorities and the related issue of Turkey's EU membership. They also involve the modern state's incomplete grasp of its own identity as an open society that respects civil rights. Its inability to see the religious component of its inclusiveness implies the same sort of self-deception that characterizes religions when they attempt to define themselves negatively. It can, in its own way, lead to an autoimmune reaction, one leading to the denial or, at least, suspension of its most cherished values.



The remedy, here, is as unremarkable as it is difficult. It involves acknowledging the other in oneself. Institutionally, it means being honest with regard one's relation to one's predecessors as Roman Catholicism has attempted, in the past decades, with regard to Judaism [10]. Such predecessors are not just the otheragainst which the religions of the book and the modern secular state had to struggle to establish their successive identities. They are also a part of their identities. Like the parents and other figures in childhood development, they are not just overcome, but internalized. As such, they remain as sedimented layers of the institutional identity. The same holds for the successors against which the religions struggled. They too are part of their histories. When we view such others in terms of the openness that is the positive aspect of the transcendence of the divine, they can no longer function in our attempt to define ourselves negatively. Here, openness to the other is also openness to the other in oneself. We have to admit that this other is also our neighbour. As the parable of the good Samaritan suggest, he could be the stranger, the follower of a different faith.