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AN ENCOUNTER OF TWO WORLDS

The Intercultural Aspects of Helping Relationships

MERLE, K., ed. (2013) ***Kulturwelten: Zum Problem des Fremdverstehens in der Seelsorge*** **(Münster: LIT) 344 pp., 23.5 x 16 cm, ISBN 978-3-643-11629-1, € 34.90.**

1. Introduction

The book edited by the German theologian Kristin Merle highlights the complicated structure of interpersonal understanding. The editor of the book, who represents the empirical renewal of pastoral theology and also authored part of the volume, carefully chose her co-authors, each from a different applied field. The book revolves around the subject of interculturality, and the authors make it clear that the meeting of two people really means an encounter between two different worlds.

In the 1970s a new question arose (CARTER 1991): what is the role of cultural values in a certain group concerning the success of a helping relationship between two people? Four factors were found significant when studying the impact on interpersonal relationships: the values represented by the client, the values the counsellor was driven by, their assumptions about the problem, and the institutional possibilities and limitations of the helping relationship. That means that counsellors living in a culturally closed, 'encapsulated' environment can only understand their client if they have a clear self-understanding and know well their own social and cultural background, the source of their experiences and the reasons why they belong to a group with certain values. It is important that they are aware of the patterns and stereotypes that determine their view.

More than ten years ago SCHNEIDER-HARPPRECHT (2002) raised the question about the adequate way of helping someone from a different culture, religion, or with special living conditions. According to him, special intercultural competence is needed to achieve that goal. Without such intercultural competence, we cannot even fully understand the person living next to us. In order to achieve this empathic attitude, we need to handle consciously the other person's unfamiliar, different personality, characteristics and situation. The volume offers contributions written in that conceptual framework and illustrated by case studies, stemming from the Christian tradition, of person-centred pastoral counselling.

2. The intercultural relationship of counsellor and client

Interculturalism means the colourfulness and difference in views and behaviour occurring during the contact of two people representing different cultures (NIEDERMÜLLER 1999). A person coming from a foreign environment can have difficulties in her work, in her private sphere, in her ecclesiastical and educational life, during her stay in a hospital, or concerning the environment in which she lives. Given that in such cases the risk of isolation and exclusion is really high, the main aim of the studies in the book is to encourage the adequate communication of those who help them.

Authentic experiences shared by authors urge us to improve the theory and practice of poimenics. Jesus turned to those who asked for help, seeing their belief, past and circumstances, and his love resulted in a change of their conditions. In order to give assistance effectively, we need to consider the social background of the strangers as much as we can, keeping in mind the guidance of the Old and New Testament (Ex 22:20, 23:6.9; Heb 12:22), according to which foreigners are also 'fellow citizens with the saints and of the household of God' (Eph 2:19).

3. The structure and content of the book

Will the counsellor be able to see the multiple perspectives in the conversation as an opportunity, or will she see it as an obstacle to perfect understanding? According to the preface of the book, the hermeneutical issue of understanding strangers raised by GADAMER (1960) is a constant challenge for pastoral counselling.

The book is divided into three main units. The *first section* (15–112) draws up a coordinate system of spirituality and the philosophy of culture. In each study the authors compare two different areas of research, and the reader realises that knowing one of them necessarily makes the other unknown. However, as Merle points out in the first chapter (15–34), a place, person or time being unknown is not its characteristic, it is just a factor showing the relationship between the two participants, and this factor is characterised by the presence of both closeness and distance. The trust or distrust felt towards the stranger determines whether one feels the other distant, inscrutable, mysterious, frightful or dangerous. When one reacts to strangers with a particular behaviour, they can keep a distance, show exclusion or hostility, and they name the barriers between them language, lifestyle or views. The degree to which the other feels alien determines how well we can accept and get to know the other as an individual. If the cultural traditions and values are different, understanding each other can be difficult at every level. This way, understanding another person is just a construction in our minds that can get close to reality but can never fully reach it. Communication is the only way to get closer to understanding each other, even if the true nature of the stranger is never revealed.

Wilhelm Gräb's paper (35–54) deals with the difficulty of interpreting the concepts of religion, belief and spirituality. Due to the fading meaningfulness of church language, rites and symbols, the forms of expressing beliefs become individual for everyone. But society cannot give up on the instruments of religion. Spirituality helps the individual to place herself in a broader context. In order to understand the other, it is essential to reconsider the religious, spiritual and sociological concepts – warns Regine Herbrik in the next essay (55–73).

Gerd Sebald (75–86) highlights that during the conversation of two people who are strangers to each other, the personal space and environment determines individual interpretations. To find meaning, the other person's words, tone, mimics and gestures serve as a basis, but later on, the interpreter can only rely on her own schemes and explanations. In life, people permanently exchange their objective and subjective experiences and interpretations. It makes interpersonal communication more effective in understanding the stranger if these interpretation patterns are somewhat similar. The immediate environment, the family, a group or a relationship determines the reactions, the background and the sensitivity of an individual. The sphere of 'us' surrounds and influences the sphere of 'me'. Jörg Metelmann (87–112) analyses this phenomenon in the study closing this section. In connection with a television film, *Toter Mann* ('Dead Man') dealing with a revenge fantasy, he shows the standardised patterns of emotions like revenge, punishment and reparation from the point of view of the victim. With the help of this example, he points out how emotions generated by the media verify and make people aware of their emotions and reactions, morals and values.

The *second main section* (115–271) deals with certain special areas of pastoral counselling. It not only discusses the temporary environments of hospital, school, prison, circus, airport and holiday resort, but also explains the special context of personal stories created by online communication, trauma and grief. The authors reflect on their own dedicated work, in the role of both participant and observer, and try to find their own explanation to the experiences of the client.

Tabitha Walther's exemplary study (115–32) explains that being in a hospital is a typical situation of feeling alienated because people experience alienation on all levels. However, the counsellor's goal of reducing the suffering is not unattainable. Through the guidance of universal symbols, we can reach the universal source of cultures and beliefs that connect all of us humans together.

Thomas H. Böhm (133–50) explains the connecting force of virtual networks. Online communication offers new forms of counselling relationships in which we need to re-evaluate the scale of closeness/directness and distance/anonimity. Even the smallest efforts may result in responses, and we can reach those who are far from actual supporting communities. Through virtual space, we can also reach those who are dissatisfied with reality and real conditions (Lk 14:23).

'I had achieved little that I had wanted, and everything that I had achieved

I had ceased to want'[1] says the nameless heroine of Marlen HAUSHOFER's novel, *The Wall* (1990, 50). Maike Schult (151–70) uses this character to show the state of mind when one feels the trauma of the barriers of their personal world. When self-explanations do not work and values are questioned, it is especially important to place the strange, traumatic experience into a biographic context. Pieces of literature and stories of the Bible can show some alternative for sufferers in their own personal life.

Henrik Simojoki (171–86) explores the problem of hybrid identity in a school environment. He wants to find interculturally competent experts to help the children and teenagers who belong to several worlds but cannot find their place in any of them. The integration of migrants is essential to make them familiar with, and accept, those feelings that they experience as foreign in themselves. They need to find a coherent identity despite the fact that they were forced to leave their home or change their religion.

In contrast to these, the careers of comedians, showmen and street musicians depend on this state of being mediators – as Bernard Eisel explains in his ethnography (187–204). The sociocultural background of travelling circuses is really unique. What is special about them is that they accept being a stranger and not having a permanent home. It is a consciously maintained minority culture with its own language, familial structure, special rules and regulations. The microcosm of these people is a great example of the increasingly common phenomenon that a group's values and views totally differ from those of the counsellors who want to help them.

Airport chaplain Kerstin Söderblom puts an emphasis on the need to respect and accept differences (205–24). The terminal, she suggests, serves as a temporary area (intermediate space) where events that already happened and events that will happen co-exist. Assisting passengers often requires the skill of travelling between worlds, cultures, and religions, which competence can only evolve if we know our own background and past, and if we have broad knowledge professionally and in terms of religion.

Martin Krauß (225–42) reports from a prison, which is an extremely important place for pastoral counselling. The space is limited there, and we need to distinguish between the person and his actions, the actual sin and the feeling of animosity, the punishment and a chance to start again. The feeling of alienation by society's outcasts is both objective and subjective. The journey to understand them, according to the author, is similar to a pilgrimage: it requires persistence, continuity and a sense of purpose. It is essential to respect the stranger. The spirit of the counsellor cannot be hidden from the prisoners. It necessarily shows itself in the results he achieves, whether the internal barriers of his clients collapse or are strengthened.

Cäcilie Blume's contributioon (243–58) explores another special aspect of feeling alienated. Funerals are supporting opportunities when church life and personal

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[1]   Original text: 'Ich hatte wenig erreicht von allem, was ich gewollt hatte, und alles, was ich erreicht hatte, hatte ich nicht mehr gewollt' (154).

life intersect. In the traditional liturgical framework of a church funeral, the favourite music of the deceased can appear as something out of place if it is a folk song or a pop song. But even if the personal choice of the relatives seems strange or of a different taste, the unfamiliar feeling caused by the music can still be overcome. The pastor or the congregation who know their own musical 'mother tongue' should see no threat if a situation with strong personal involvement asks for a different, rather special musical relief.

Klaus Nagorni's study (259–71) focuses on experiences beyond everyday life: the joy of being on the road, leaving the world of limited opportunities, finding a new reality and the happiness of transformation. The tourist who dares to leave behind their familiar environment for a while is inspired to get to know and accept the stranger inside them.

The *third main section* (275–335) offers summarising studies of theology, cultural anthropology and psychology in order to understand the feeling of being a stranger. As Otmar Fuchs, a follower of prophetic counselling, points out, we can only leave our regular life at a point when the extraordinary makes its way into normality (275–98). We can only see reality when we try something totally different. Birgit Weyel (299–312) believes that psychological counselling is always intercultural. It is clear that the background and experiences of the counsellor and the client are totally different, and the personal life story determines how one sees the world. Psychological counselling means the reciprocal exchange and sharing of personal meanings. The person who requires help should always be treated during the conversation as an equal partner who is competent to make decisions about his or her own life even in times of crisis. In the concluding chapter of the book, Helmut Weiß (313–36) emphasises that a counselling relationship always means reflecting on different perspectives. There are different forces of language and content, body and emotions, historical and personal experience, partners and relationships. Dynamics of different cultures and religions appear in every meeting. A competent counsellor traces these motions and makes them conscious during the dialogue, relying on the resources that the client shares with them.

4. The validity and relevance of intercultural approach

Interculturality has been an important aspect of religious life since Biblical times. It is the responsibility of every Christian believer. It can be found in different forms of communication when believers pray, sing or dance together, in the collective rituals of serving God, in setting the special frames of catechesis, and in helping those in need. Intercultural attitude always needs and brings a broader and more differentiated worldview and behaviour.

This book puts basic socio-psychological terms such as polarisation, exclusion, generalisation, preconception and stereotypes in a new, different light. Interculturally oriented professionals are aware of their own values and assumptions,

therefore they do not question the significance of values which others find important. They can deal with the problems of refusal and suppression, and by stepping out of their own comfort zone, they dare to use the techniques and methods which are effective between different denominations, religions and cultures. Intercultural competence means, both in the case of an individual and of a community, that participants are able to enhance the similarities and make them the basis of the dialogue while they can also respect and accept their differences. In the practice of psychology it means that not only the client's problem but also the setting, the 'Sitz im Leben' of the meeting has a multicultural context. System-oriented intercultural psychology focuses on changed situations in life and tries to find value-oriented behavioural alternatives. It examines barriers, roles and influential positions from several angles. In order to find our connections again, we can hold on to simple sentences, symbols and rites. If we understand the important events of personal life, that gives birth to new, healing narratives.

However, when we deal with the differences of cultural background that determine communication, we should not forget about the basic principles of a helping relationship as articulated by Carl Rogers in 1954 (PATTERSON 2004). Respect towards the patient, the assumption that they know their own problem best and that they are capable of progress, and also the counsellor's authenticity and skill for empathic understanding are the key factors in psychotherapy because these work with every type of client.

5. Who would we recommend the book to?

For practising counsellors, this book gives an opportunity to reconsider their views and attitudes that might have become routine. For those who are still learning, it can help in finding the way to face their own inner obstacles, schemes and generalisations. The goal is not to unite world religions or even denominations but to preserve and maintain Christian patience and the skill to communicate (SCHWEITZER 2012). The message of this book can help in the field of social service, in pastoral counselling and in cultural service. Intercultural thinking invisibly trickles into the reader's mind.

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