THE OTHER AS MY EQUAL

Rasoul Rasoulipour

In September 2007, during my first visit to the University of Notre Dame, I was invited for a talk at the Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Va. It was the time when they were opening a centre for interfaith dialogue named “Abraham’s Tent.” As a Shia Muslim who is familiar with the Holy Qur’an[1], I knew about the story of Abraham’s sacred guests – it is narrated in the Qur’an in two chapters[2] -- but this was the first time I noticed that the story is about ‘strangers’ – strangers who are ‘sacred’!

[Muhammad], have you heard the story of the honoured guests of Abraham? They went in to see him and said, ‘Peace.’ ‘Peace,’ he said, [adding to himself] ‘These people are strangers.’ (51:24–25)

Here God sets the scene that would become the prime example of how one’s love ought to be directed outwardly, by his own encounter with Abraham outside his tent one hot Middle Eastern afternoon. As we examine the event and look at the manner of speech, the meal provided, and the attention paid to the strangers, we are shown the extent that Abraham was willing to fully give of himself to someone else without making the typical distinctions that we make in our lives in regard to other people.

Now, in the society of this time it would not have been strange to see a host be giving and generous to a visitor – it would in fact have been “strange and disturbing” if Abraham had not attended to his guests in some way or shape, going beyond modern Western norms of simply

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[1] The citations in this article are from *The Holy Quran, A new translation*, trans. Abdel Haleem M.A.S. (New York: Oxford World’s Classics, 2004).

[2] Chapters: 15:51–60 and 51:24–37. The story is narrated with some slight differences in Genesis 18:4–8.

https://doi.org/10.35469/poligrafi.2020.234 | Poligrafi, no. 99/100, vol. 25, 2020, pp. 27–44

offering a kind smile or word. What one must pay attention to is the overwhelming gifts that Abraham offers to these strangers that had appeared outside his tent. God saw in Abraham a precious love, one that was fixed on the "other" as opposed to itself; he saw a love that took the norms of its society and superseded them in every aspect.

Abraham was truly an example: devoutly obedient to God and true in faith. He was not an idolater; he was thankful for the blessings of God who chose him and guided him to a straight path. We gave him blessings in this world, and he is among the righteous in the Hereafter. (16:120–122)

Also,

Who but a fool would forsake the religion of Abraham? We have chosen him in this world and he will rank among the righteous in the Hereafter. (2:130)

Abraham was one who did not count the cost of his love for the total stranger. He adhered to that revolutionary idea that humanity was found outside one's close personal primary group, that it could be found in potentially dangerous strangers who were in need. God chose him as a model because he saw that the practices Abraham puts into play here reveal the "common humanity that runs deeper than customary distinctions of kin and stranger, friend and enemy."[3]

This story challenges us to redirect our love and look outwards to the "other." Throughout Abraham's meeting with the strangers, he is unaware that he is in the presence of the Divine. This is the point that God wants to convey to human beings: We should treat others as though we were relating to God because of the dignity that he has imparted to us,[4] our common humanity, and the single family we share through Adam in blood and Abraham in faith. Islam itself takes a similar approach and sees that in this event "God is portrayed as a guest for whose visit one must always be prepared."[5] That preparedness refers to the unselfish

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3 J. Gerald Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 12–50* (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 53.

4 According to the beginning Qur'anic verses, 38:72.

5 Snjezana Akpinar, "Two Responses to 'Interreligious Dialogue and Spiritual Hospitality': Hospitality in Islam," *Religion East & West* 7 (2007): 1, https://issuu.com/drbu/docs/issue7_art2.

self-giving love of Abraham that God encountered outside his tent, one He wishes replicated in each and every one of us.

In this paper, I explore the causes of humanity's alienation from God and argue the necessity of respecting the basic equality and human dignity of every person that results from God's creation in order to initiate restoration.

The conflicts in our world today largely find their origin in our alienation from God and one another. This alienation is the result of human forgetfulness – the root of the Qur'anic word for human, nasy, is "forgetful one" – that produces sin.

> Do not be like those who neglect God and God causes them to be oblivious to their own souls. (59:19)

> … they have forgotten God, so he has forsaken them. (9:67)

This alienation from God, the one thing that binds all human groups most tightly, causes true alienation from one another. Without remembrance – the antidote to forgetfulness – of our relationship with the True God, who is the Ultimate Other, we fashion an idol for ourselves.

> So remember Me; I will remember you… (2:152)

> Those who have faith and whose hearts find peace in the remembrance of God – truly it is in the remembrance of God that hearts find peace. (13:28)

Worshipping a theological ideology, which focuses on one characteristic of God to the exclusion of another rather than opening to the infinite and expansive Mystery of the Divine Other, is also an idolatry practiced by extremists in religious traditions. Worshipping an exclusivist notion of God has implications not only for religious practice but also for global human relationships. When one's religious views cause one to disrespect the religious belief and practice of those outside their own tradition, tension naturally occurs. Instead of seeing "the other" in their entirety, as another human person who is owed dignity and respect, it becomes easy to define them solely by how they are opposed to us. Having reduced our understanding of their identity to this one distinguishing quality, it becomes easy to objectify and manipulate them, and more difficult to establish meaningful, mutual relationships with them. Thus, even as we move away

from authentic religious practice which draws us closer to God, we find ourselves moving further and further away from others in the human family. In the process, we dehumanise the other, and conflict and injustice ensue.

Abrahamic religions understand that while God is present in the world today, there is an unavoidable awareness of separation between God and humans that we must struggle to overcome throughout our time here in this world. This separation does not come from God's being eternal and humanity's being temporal, rather it results from the fact that human beings sin.

The principle components of any religion are orthodoxy and orthopraxy – what is right to believe and what is right to do – a combination that defines the lives of its adherents. In the Abrahamic religions, the relationship between orthodoxy and orthopraxy takes on a special characteristic. All three of the Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, are founded on divine revelation. Their beliefs and practices, at the core, trace back to a message or command from God Himself. According to this tradition, orthodoxy and orthopraxy have in God their source and subject. The divine revelation has also shown humans to be in a relationship with – Hebrew bərit (covenant), Greek diatheke (covenant, testament) Arabic misaq (pledge) – that prescribes their behaviours and practices. This relationship between God and man is defined by mutual commitment and explicit responsibilities. These overarching principles form the framework of a society marked by harmony and peace, in which humans fulfil their responsibilities toward God through their treatment of the "other." Thus, these covenants signify that believers have a responsibility and duty to obey, have faith in, and revere God. Additionally, just as a son has a responsibility to care for and protect his siblings, as well as his father's livestock, land and other possessions, the believer has a responsibility to maintain and uphold the dignity of his fellow man, even if he is not a "brother in faith," but as a part of God's creation, "belonging" to God, as it were. As the Qur'an enjoins:

> Be a community that calls for what is good, urges what is right, and forbids what is wrong: those who do this are the successful ones. Do not be like those

who, after they have been given clear revelation, split into factions and fall into disputes... (3:104–110)

A sense of religious duty has been used to justify acts of violence through history, from the bloody "conversions" of the Crusades to terrorist acts on 9/11 and sectarian suicide bombings in Afghanistan, Iraq, India, and Pakistan. The same scriptures that reveal the duty toward the other also contain instances of seemingly sanctioned violence toward the other. The book of Joshua, for example, contains the issues of "the ban," the practice of killing all living things in a conquered city or encampment and holy war.[6] In the Gospel of Matthew Christ states that He has come not to bring peace but a sword,[7] and Sura al-Tawba (Repentance) of the Qur'an commands that idolaters be "killed," "seized," and "besieged."[8]

However, each of these cases can be explained in context. Though all of these passages seem to advocate violence towards the other, any general application of them is an abusive misunderstanding. Of course, as history attests, such interpretations have sometimes been applied and have often coloured interactions between and attitudes toward members of different faiths and ethnic groups. Yet the "other" is not, for the true believer, to be regarded with fear or suspicion or murderous intent. Rather the other is of infinite value, both as a being created by God and a path towards greater relationship with Him. God does allow humans to work towards achieving this access to Him and, in essence, overcoming the alienation between Himself and humanity. Imam Ali9 advised his governor to Egypt:

And be aware that people fall under one of two categories: they are either your brother and sister in faith, or your equal in creation. (Nahjul Balaqah, "Peak of Eloquence," letter 53)

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[6] Chapters 1–12.

[7] Matthew 10:34–36.

[8] Chapter 9: 6, 12–14.

[9] Ali ibn Abi Talib (600-661 CE), the first Imam of Shias who was the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad. He ruled over the Islamic caliphate from 656 to 661. He was the first male who accepted Islam. Sunnis consider Ali the fourth and final of the rightly guided Caliphs. Shias consider him and his descendants the rightful successors to the Prophet. This disagreement split the Muslim community into the Sunni and Shia branches.

God would not allow humans to become misguided without making it clear that there was a path towards repairing this void between humanity and Himself. Through the examples put forth within all the Divine Scriptures, humans can become illuminated about the path that will lead them towards a reunion with God. The Qur'an gives an example of how to journey towards becoming closer with God and overcoming that alienation. One way to begin viewing how the Qur'an reveals its evidence about moving forward in a journey towards union with God is to see how the Qur'an views what is sacred and what is not. One can find such an example through the passage:

Wherever you turn, there is His Face. (2:115)

The same phrase can be seen in the Bible:

Behold me; here am I. (Isaiah 65:1)

These passages show that, rather than alienation, wherever one turns, God is reflected. This involves seeing the sacredness of the other and understanding that Allah is the source of all existence and all cosmic and human qualities as well as the End to Whom all things return. The Qur'an is pointing out very clearly that God is not simply sitting on His throne in heaven, but is present wherever you look; because of His all-encompassing presence, one must treat what one sees with the respect they would show God.

Religion, as some philosophers of religion have defined it, is but a "diagnosis and cure."[10] A religion proposes a diagnosis (an account of the basic problem) and a cure (how to decisively solve that problem) – one basic problem shared by every human person and one fundamental solution that, however adapted to different cultures and cases, is essentially the same across the board. Religions differ insofar as their diagnosis and cures differ. For example some religions are monotheistic and some

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[10] Keith Yandel, *Philosophy of Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999). Regarding "diagnosis and cure" in some of the non-Abrahamic religions, Yandel says: "According to Advaita Vedanta, the sickness is our ignorance of our being identical with Brahman and the cure is gaining this knowledge. According to Jainism, the sickness is that we think we are ignorant and dependent and the cure is learning that we are omniscient and existentially independent. According to Theravada Buddhism, our sickness is that we take ourselves to be enduring substances and the cure is learning that we are only transitory states." (p. 33)

are not. Hence some diagnoses are offered in terms of alienation from God and cures are presented that concern removing that alienation, while other diagnoses and cures make no reference to God. According to the Abrahamic traditions, our sickness is sin and the cure is God's mercy and forgiveness, variously tied to our action and repentance or not, as the Qur'an says,

> Those who remember God and implore forgiveness for their sins if they do something shameful or wrong themselves [by transgression] – who forgives sins but God? – and who never knowingly persist in doing wrong. (3:135)

So sin can be considered that which causes the separation of humanity and individual humans from God. This is actually a vicious cycle – sin separates us from God, separation makes sin more likely, more sin increases the separation.

Moreover, humans are very social creatures. We enjoy being around friends, family, and people who share similar traits and values with us. For this reason, we tend to form groups that establish our place in society. However, the unfortunate effect of forming these "in-groups" is that they necessarily define "out-groups." People in these "out-groups" are often shunned by those who are considered part of the "in-group," sometimes with verbal abuse, and even occasionally with physical violence. The people in these "out-groups" are seen as "strangers," "aliens," and "others," designations that can be hard to shake and that can persist down through the generations, at least until someone finally chooses to conform to what the "in-group" wants them to do or to be. History is filled with examples of people, both in the East and in the West, who have suffered discrimination because they were relegated to an alien status. Interestingly enough, as the world has gotten "smaller" through the advent of modern technology and more and more people consider themselves to be "world citizens," the number of "aliens" that are seen as outside of the "in-group" has increased. There is no simple solution to this problem, unfortunately, as humans always seem to form such groups at the expense of others.

In the Qur'an, human beings are not separated into categories based on race or language. There is no mention in Surah 49 of the importance of one's lineage or ancestry, but according to piety – those who have

high ranks with Allah versus those who are sinful and disgraced in the eyes of God – for we are all created by God.

> People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognize one another. In God's eyes, the most honoured of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all knowing, all aware. (49:13)

Also,

> And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the difference of your languages and colours. Verily, in that are indeed signs for men of sound knowledge. (30:22)

However, it is important to remember that the relationship of alienation of people from each other and from God is not simply the cause of misunderstanding and differences in language. It is deeply rooted at the heart of humanity's relationship to itself and everything else. Alienation can be caused by struggle, oppression or suffering, and that is where we find ourselves today. We must realize that conflicts and "otherness" can truly cause alienation from ourselves, our fellow human beings, and God, as well as the rest of His creation.

We cannot discuss the word "stranger" without mentioning *The Stranger*, Albert Camus' brilliant novel. *The Stranger* captures the story of a man who does not feel connected to God and cannot see his purpose in this life. While some contend that Meursault, the narrator, may suffer from mental illness, more evidence suggests that he suffers from an inability to feel or give compassion. Meursault and his story demonstrate the potential for extreme individualism and violence as a result of discrimination and loneliness.

In his article "Camus' Stranger: His Act of Violence," Julian Stamm attempts to identify the reasoning behind Meursault's violent act. Before the murder, Meursault tends to choose to be neutral; instead of answering questions or facing tough situations, he passively avoids them. When given the opportunity to commit a violent act, he does so. Stamm concludes about this act, "Camus clearly implies that this can happen to you and to me, that such an act could be repeated over and

over again through all time."[11] As Camus may imply, there is certainly evidence for the human capacity to commit heinous acts of violence against each other. Perhaps, Meursault's act is the radical potential for our free will to go completely awry. Each human is endowed with free will, and Meursault's action demonstrates that there must be a counter-balance to our free will.

Karen Armstrong presents another choice for Meursault in her TED Talk "The Charter for Compassion." She believes that compassion for all people is the gateway to peace and acceptance of others in our world. Through a discourse of personal history and extensive research on various traditions, Armstrong presents her thesis: "Because in compassion, when we feel with the other, we dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another person there. And once we get rid of ego, then we're ready to see the divine. And in particular, every single one of the major world traditions has highlighted – has said – and put at the core of their tradition what's become known as the Golden Rule."[12]

How could we expect to overcome that conflict as a society when the conflict can barely be overcome on a person-to-person basis? Armstrong's solution to the conflicts in our world is simple; treat others the way you want to be treated. The disconnection between Camus and Armstrong directly relates to the larger issue: how do we avoid the feeling of otherness and create a connection with God? Armstrong argues that we do that through treating everyone with compassion.

Apparently Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) was the first philosopher to talk about "the other" by naming God as "The Wholly Other."[13] Perceiving God for him was the numinous experience that evokes fear and trembling, a quality of mysticism, the tendency to attract, fascinate and compel. The numinous experience also has a personal quality, in that the person feels that they are in communion with a wholly other.

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11 Julian L Stamm, "Camus' Stranger: His Act of Violence," *American Imago* 26, no. 3 (1969): 283, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26302600.

12 Karen Armstrong, "The Charter for Compassion," filmed February 2008, TED video, 21:15, http://www.ted.com/talks/karen_armstrong_makes_her_ted_prize_wish_the_charter_for_compassion.html.

13 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 28.

Martin Buber (1878–1965) and more recently Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) also speak about 'the Other.' Buber coins the 'I-Thou' engagement[14] and Levinas talks about the 'Face-to-Face' relation.[15] Here, I would like to deal with these two theses:

The book *I and Thou* by Martin Buber philosophically attempts to describe how humans can love others. We constantly categorise each other, creating distance between us. Meursault, the main character of Camus's *The Stranger,* never makes a connection to another being, neither human nor divine, but Buber's ideas offer the proper way to do so. The underlying philosophy of humanity's mode of engaging the world in Buber's book is an examination of humanity's existence that entails Meursault's difficulty in showing compassion towards others. He expounds upon Meursault's inability to connect with others, considering it a staple problem of modern society and offers a solution in the third section of *I and Thou*. Buber addresses the twofold mode of humanity's relationship with the world. Explained through the two terms I-It and I-You, Buber describes the modes of engagement that distinguishes the I's in both expressions. The I in the I-It relationship relies on the experience of the objectification of the surrounding world; the I in the I-You relationship is purely relational with the world. The humans' twofold mode of existence is further elaborated in part two where modern society has shaped man to choose one mode over the other. In a predominantly I-It society, Buber argues, man feels alienated because of the emptiness brought upon by the lack of relation with the world. Ultimately, Buber offers a solution in part three that seeks to reform society into a better community by acknowledging the necessity of encountering God.

While human encounters with others may be exclusive, Buber argues that in relation to God "unconditional exclusiveness and unconditi-

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[14] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970).

[15] Emanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 95. Also, I'd like to add that it was only near the completion of my research on this paper that I discovered a very inspiring multi-year project on encountering the other as stranger as represented by people of other religions. The project's name is: "The Guestbook Project: Hosting the Stranger," which is "an ongoing artistic, academic, and multi-media experiment in hospitality," sponsored by Boston College. It is available online: http://www.bc.edu/schools/cas/guestbook/.

onal inclusiveness are one."[16] It is exclusive in that we relate to the You in such a way that we view the universe through God. At the same time, the inclusiveness of the "I-God" relationship is brought upon the fact that in relating to God, we are relating to His entire universe.

Nevertheless, the same feeling of actually loving another and potentially loving another still exists for the I. Not only is God eternal because of His inability to be reduced to an It, but the relation as both exclusive and inclusive fosters the actualisation of God within the world and makes Him the eternal You.

Through the combined effort of multiple people who have encountered God, Buber argues, societal reform from a world of I-It to I-You can solve the feelings of emptiness and anxiety. Finding God can give meaning back to life.

Emmanuel Levinas has a different approach to describing our relationship with the other. For him, the clearest and most potent revelation that I am not everything—that everything does not belong to me, and that my consciousness does not encompass everything—is the face of the Other.[17] "Other" here (especially when capitalized) means "someone else," "the other person," "the person I encounter." If it were not for the face of the other person, I might indeed maintain the illusion that everything I experience and enjoy (food, landscapes, things) is indeed mine. But once I encounter the Other, I realise that there is something absolutely and irreducibly apart from myself, and that the world I enjoy and seem to possess also belongs to the Other; my possession and sovereignty are contested. There is a religious dimension to his thought—ultimately the Other, who is calling us to service and responsibility, is God. He argues, however, that God does not do this directly, but rather through the face of the Other— i.e., through the neighbour ("near one"), whoever it may be, that I encounter—as well as through scripture (e.g., the Bible) and through "testimony," that is, the response within

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16 Buber, *I and Thou*, 127.

17 However, in a chapter entitled Phenomenology of Eros, describing femininity as a figure of otherness, Levinas talks about the manifestation of the beloved "Beyond the Face"; also the title of Section IV of the book: Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague, Boston and London: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers & Duquesne University Press, 1979), 256–266.

ourselves that (even before we have a chance to analyse or choose it) is aroused by the Other.[18]

Radical conceptions treat the Other as identical to the Self or entirely the opposite. With the recognition that "conceptualizing activity is a highly suspect process, [since] conceptualizations of the Other do violence to it by forcing alterity to 'fit' within predetermined mental structures that deprive the Other of its own unique identity."[19] I suggest that the most helpful step to take is to avoid the assumption that "the Self" means the known and "the Other" means the unknown. Such a perspective leads to misguided statements such as "the Other" is unknown, therefore…" and similar generalisations. Since all conceptualisations rely, at least on a basic level, on certain primitive assumptions, I do not attempt to formulate a proof, but merely offer an alternative perspective to many of the radical positions. I propose that alterity can best be understood through a paradox: in recognizing the unknown within ourselves, we unite with the Other and their unknown qualities. The search for satisfaction in God captures this paradox.

Since this paper approaches alterity through a religious perspective, it is important to recognise that religious traditions are not constrained within any single intellectual paradigm. That is, Christianity and Islam emerged prior to the totalising rationality of Modernity and still exist through post-modernity. To view such a pre-modern, yet living, religion properly, we must do our best to disassociate Christianity, Islam, or other traditions from any one intellectual era or paradigm.

The process of understanding the self and the other is comparative. Through focusing on similarities and, more importantly, differences between others and ourselves, we form identities. Our descriptions of others and ourselves involve characteristics and other forms of distinction to emphasise how we are like or unlike each other. This focus not only defines how we view others, but also how we view ourselves. The entire system of descriptions turns on what separates one person from another. To describe myself as a citizen of the world might have a nice

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18 Richard A. Cohen, ed., *Face to Face with Levinas*, SUNY Series in Philosophy (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1986), 27.

19 Marsha A. Hewitt, "Alterity and Ethics," *Religion* 27, no. 2 (1997): 101–105, https://doi.org/10.1006/reli.1997.0068.

ring to it, but it doesn't give a customs officer any information he might need to know. For me to be able to differentiate myself as an individual, I must be able to use words that set me apart from others. In this sense, the Self is not inherently known, but merely created relative to those around it. That is, perspectives on what make us each unique do inherently that: define us in comparison with others. In this sense, our understanding of ourselves comes not from within, but from the outside.

Due to this weak ability to understand the Self, Jonathan Smith argues that the Other becomes "most problematic when he is too-much--like-us …The problem is not alterity, but similarity."[20] That is, since the definition of the Self comes from comparisons to others, defining the Self as unique becomes problematic when the Other is not obviously so different. This tension, Smith asserts, creates identity issues. Curtis Freeman, however, offers a powerful alternative to Smith's assertions. He writes that an account of alterity is needed wherein "otherness is not simply the mirror image of the regnant ideology but something radically other. Only from such a standpoint of radical otherness can there be the leverage to subvert the structures of representation and domination."[21]

I suggest that such radical positions fall under the category of "totalizing rationality." We encounter the unknown constantly; we learn about foreign cultures on television, meet new people in the classroom or at work, and we recognize new thoughts and emotions inside ourselves. The unknown is not merely foreign cultures or separate religions. Through recognising that the known and unknown are not merely the Self and the Other, respectively, alterity takes on a new dimension. While the Other may indeed have qualities we do not understand, recognising the unknown in both the Other and the Self leads to a commonality between the two.

Edith Wyschogrod argues powerfully that, "a moral theory that promotes the conditions of agency for others betrays alterity in that

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[20] Jonathan Z. Smith, "What a Difference a Difference Makes," in *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Christians, Jews and "Others" in Late Antiquity*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985): 47.

[21] Curtis W. Freeman, "Alterity and its Cure," *Cross Currents* 59, no. 4 (2009): 404–441, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24461588.

it presupposes the other as a 'second self' to whom the conditions of agency are to be extended."[22] Such a radical position, however, ignores the fact that including "the unknown" as a quality of both the Self and the Other, does not actually make any presuppositions about the Other. Such radical positions are untenable insofar as they remove the possibility of any commonality between the Self and the Other. Indeed, Wyschogrod's thesis asserts that the only means of connecting with the Other are through entirely rejecting the Self. Marsha Hewitt correctly notes that "such a view is not only politically problematic as a prescription for daily conduct; it is also unsatisfactory. How can one possibly see another, feel another's need and suffering, if one has no sense of self that allows one to feel pain and suffering in ways that allow for basic human empathy toward the other's situation?"[23]

Whereas the alterity theorists I have cited focus on whether or not we can extend the traits we find in ourselves to the Other, I suggest that we ought to view the dilemma from the opposite perspective. The question changes from "Which of my qualities can I ascribe to the Other?" to "Are there traits in myself that I do not understand even as I condemn the unknown of the Other?" In this new perspective, the goal of discourse and establishing identities is not to control or be able to manipulate. Rather, engagement leads to greater insights about both the Other and ourselves that move towards unity. The drive for power through knowledge turns against itself when one recognises the Unknown inherent in himself. This paradox, that through our undefined or recognised qualities we are the same as the Other, leads to true unity. Indeed, proper religion itself embodies this beautiful uncertainty. Even as God is the ultimate Other, unknowable and transcendent, the call of religion is to experience satisfaction and hope in Him. Religion calls us both toward and away from ourselves through embracing the unknown both in God and ourselves. There is a unity in building community around the unknown. We are in a world that, because of sin, constantly

22 Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 71.
23 Hewitt, "Alterity and Ethics," 103.

fails to achieve its aim, but at the same time we are creatures of a God who does not fail.

Lisette Josephides offers "moments" of this paradox in action. She explains that the Pauline *ecclesia* in Christianity, for example, was a "community of foreigners, founded on missionary activity undertaken in the name of charity (caritas, 'love') and as a 'means of summoning people of goodwill against xenophobia and racism' (Kristeva 1993: 23). The *ecclesia* is made up of 'uprooted wanderers' assimilated to a group new to all (1993: 22)."[24] She continues through the "moment" of "the exodus of Jews from Egypt and Ruth's marriage to Boaz (whose children founded the lineage of kings) reminds us that 'divine revelation requires a disparity, the welcoming of a radical otherness, the acknowledging of foreignness …' (1993: 24)"[25] In each of these moments we encounter the assimilation of foreignness into the Self. I disagree with Josephides, however, on the assimilation of the Other. Since the Self is not entirely known, the Other need not transition from unknown into known to become my brother or sister. I may indeed welcome the foreignness of the Other, but she must not assimilate into the known in order to become welcome.

Obviously, paradoxes cannot be entirely elucidated. By their very nature they are convoluted and resist explanation. Yet through at least recognising the paradox of alterity, I hope that the suppressing rationality of radical schemes might give way to a moderate understanding of otherness. The known and unknown exist in both the Other and the Self. Ironically, part of the "known" in both the Self and the Other is the fact that each includes the "unknown." Through an understanding of the utter transcendence and otherness of God we can better respect the Other and seek to move beyond the negative alterity which divides us and creates schisms.

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[24] Lisette Josephides, "Cosmopolitanism as the existential condition of humanity," *Social Anthropology* 18, no. 4 (2010): 391, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8676.2010.00121.x: 391.
[25] Ibid.

Conclusion

If the human problem is alienation and the solution is reconciliation, the first step is recognising that alienation and its effects, then choosing to view the Other as one with equal dignity and deserving respect. The otherness of the other is not the problem. We can choose to treat the other as an object, an inferior and an enemy, or we can choose to treat the other as an equal actor in our shared space and time who deserves the same esteem, rights and privileges that we desire for ourselves. Such a stance does not require or imply love or special commitment – indeed, it is the recognition of a not-special commitment, a commitment owed to every human being, that can become the arena of our activity and a foundation for love.

The process of moving from alienation to relationship, compassion, and hospitality first of all involves a process of critical self-reflection, of learning to see our unconscious complicity in the structures and prejudices which alienate us from one another. The hoped-for fruit of this critical self-reflection is an awakening to the value of the other and the corresponding discovery of the capacity for relationship with this other, born from the acceptance of the other in their very otherness. The Other need not transform from unknown into known to become my brother or sister. I may indeed accept and respect the otherness of the Other.

Acceptance and respect for the other, even acknowledgement of duties toward the other as a fellow human being, is a necessary step toward curing the alienation that afflicts humanity. It is necessary, but not sufficient. This recognition is the precondition for love and compassion, a disposition which in turn leads us to extend ourselves in hospitality, welcoming the stranger in our midst as friend and honoured guest.[26] And it is in extending hospitality that we mysteriously meet God, face to face.

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[26] One of the brilliant philosophers who has made an inspiring contribution to the subject of "Hospitality" is Jacques Derrida. See, for example, Gil Anidjar, ed., *Jacques Derrida: Acts of Religion* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 356–420. Also, John D. Caputo, ed., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997).

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