

“Identity”

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Identity is the creation and the preoccupation of our age. When religion was secure, when God was in his heaven and all was right with his world, then everyone knew their station and their destiny. But something has happened that has over-turned the ancient order. And what happened is that God and you and I have come near to each other—that is, the verities of identity as they used to be understood in terms of a divinely predetermined order or caste, rank, clan, nationality, faith, race, “world” (“first” to “third”), economic status, sexual orientation, etc., etc. Once assumed to be divinely established as “nature” in a particular traditional understanding, these verities have all been washed away. It’s tragically moving to see an African bushman, standing naked in front of a BP service station on the edge of the savannah, trying to decide which direction to turn, which is better for his family, the increasingly difficult life of his ancestors or the promise of the new world economy. But it’s a false choice; it’s the same either way. The crisis is unavoidable.

Yet we all yearn for the simple verities of the life of our parents. The right wing of the culture wars threatens major corporations if they don’t take action supposed to restore the so-called traditional family, or calls for the liberation of “Christmas” greetings as if there was ever a national consensus on the celebration of Christmas. So we approach this question asked of John the Baptist, “Who are you?” facing in one direction or another. Either we want to reassert some familiar abode like, “I am who gave me birth, or raised me, or hired me, or married me, or welcomes me at worship; I am a member of this club, neighborhood, or gang.” Or we opt for a different, more fluid identity: “I am who I am, I’m going to be whoever I choose.” Or perhaps more likely still, “I’m not that person” At first this might seem more free and more romantic, even more responsible. But ultimately we discover that we become who we are fascinated with, who we adore or hate. We become what we are captured by. Even in conflict we imitate our enemy.

I remember my chagrin at discovering what I had become in my first semester at Yale. Terrified and intimidated by all I’d heard about the preppies from Andover and Choate, I looked upon other students as arrogant snobs. Until one day I realized with the help of another freshman that I had become a worse snob about them than they had ever been toward me. How I had looked at them, what I had seen in them, had formed my own identity.

Camus, the existentialist author of the period after the Second World War, has one of the characters in his novel The Plague say, “God [does] not exist, since otherwise there would be no need of priests.” In Camus’ time the plague of war had exposed the optimistic religious naiveté of an earlier time and made the existence of God—a God who would allow the holocaust—a matter of question and belief in that God a matter of scandal. But without the existence of God something is needed to maintain order, to keep people in line with a heavenly promise and threat, a cosmic carrot and stick. Camus’ character doesn’t accept the existence of God but he recognizes humanity’s need for the charade.

Something like that exposure in our time characterizes the situation in the time of Jesus. The Roman conquest and occupation of the Land and the desecration of the Temple

finally resulting in its destruction and the burning of Jerusalem a generation or so after the death of Jesus and a generation before the writing of John's Gospel, raised the kind of questions about the efficacy of the temple and its sacrificial system that broke down the order and structure that held Israelite society together. And yet there is a concern to reestablish that order, or to find a new order to replace it. And that takes forms like asking questions of identity the answers to which depend upon lineage, geographical and ethnic origin, or which prophetic school—Isaiah, Elijah, the messiah—someone follows.

And the crisis that leads us to the polarization of our society today causes us to be associated with a camp, a cause, a wing, or a party, to find a secure location for our identity. In the Church we call this tendency by the name "schism." The stories of how Jesus' disciples developed rivalries about who was the greatest show that it is in the very nature of the church for this tendency to operate. It is a result of the incarnation itself, of the fact that in Jesus God has drawn near to us. So the great structures and systems of law and justice, of right and wrong, on which all of our eternal certainties have been based are exposed. We are reduced to *ad hominem* argument and interpersonal conflict; "the other side is evil," we say. "They're out to get us." And the traditional cultural and religious structures like temple, sacrifice, and priesthood, are now shown—in the light of the nearness of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—to be empty engines of repressive and meaningless violence. And without them rivalries, conflicts, and schisms flourish, and crises are stirred up. That is why—perhaps especially at Christmas and in time of war—we yearn all the more for that "old time religion," even if it is just "good old American patriotism." And by it we seem to invite a repressive reversion to a by-gone era. Religious fundamentalism, after all, is a modern phenomenon; it is an attempt to reassert the certainties of traditional society.

But even when these retro-eras are for a time reestablished (and they always come after a great sacrificial irruption of war or a binge of cultural lawlessness or greed—we can think of the fifties after WWII or of the Reagan era after the Vietnam conflict and the sixties) they are always short-lived, precisely because in the ever-brightening light of the nearness of God we can no longer avoid seeing through them. They are ultimately exposed as being empty nostalgic appeals to wanton and meaningless oppression, sacrificial violence, and bloodshed.

The cause of this cycle of cultural upheaval and repression is none other than the Incarnation itself. Now by this I do not mean the doctrine or the discovery of the doctrine of the Incarnation, for that is the result of the resurrection that allowed us to see the process for the first time. I mean the actual coming of God to be one of us, or to be among us or in us, rather than "out there" or safely hidden away in the holy of holies. All of the evangelists tell us that John the Baptist was unique in that he didn't claim priority for himself. Rather he deferred to the one coming after him. He refused any hint of rivalry and by identifying himself as the "voice crying in the wilderness," he avoided any party labels or loyalties. All of the Gospels also report that he proclaimed that the coming one him prepared for would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

The Divine Law is no longer external to us with sacrificial structures and eternal sanctions; rather God has come to dwell within, has become internal to us. And that means

that without traditional arbiters and the sacred order, without God in His Heaven, we are left to our own conflictual or peaceful devices and desires. Paul, for instance, sees clearly all that this revolution has come to mean: there is no longer slave or free, Jew or gentile, male or female; it is no longer the law, or the cosmic order or nature itself but rather "Christ" that determines my behavior and my relationships with others. And as far as identity is concerned, "it is not I who live but Christ who lives in me," and so like him we are not to repay "evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all."

It is ultimately how we see that matters. Do we seek and see Christ in all others? And do we see the Other with love, with the eyes of Christ or as a threat, a rival. Simone Weil the modern Jewish Christian mystic puts it this way: "The real aim is not to see God in all things; it is that God through us should see the things that we see. God has got to be on the side of the subject." And again: "we imitate the descending movement of God . . . [when we] turn ourselves toward the world."

In Advent we proclaim and await the coming of Christ. Much of the time in our preaching and in our observance we reduce that Coming to the celebration of the birth of a little baby. But around that birth God came to live as one of us, and in his crucifixion and resurrection, his not being received by his own, he shook us out of our slumber and denial, caused us to see our own responsibility for our own predicament. We killed Christ like we do every prophet, to shut our ears to God's call to wake up and love our enemies, forgive those who hate us, and welcome God in those very different from ourselves. Let us rejoice to embrace God who comes to us in all things. No, rather, let God embrace all things through our rejoicing.