

JESUS, STRANGERS, AND OURSELVES

A: GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

1. *Stranger*, both as a word and as referring to an actual person, is only half of a pair.
 - A *stranger* is neither a self-defined word nor a self-sufficient person.
 - A *stranger exists in relation to someone else, an other.*
 - The *other* however, is the *insider*: the stranger is the *outsider* (or "other") to the *other!*
 - A *stranger* is thus usually defined as such *by someone else, (host, boss, one in charge).*
2. To be defined by another person is problematic. But it happens to us all, to a degree.
 - Until and unless we also **self-define** (either by accepting, rejecting, or modifying such definitions), we sometimes do not have an enduring social identity
3. *Stranger/guest* often overlap: they are almost synonymous in some languages.
 - Many languages do not need two words: one word covers both *stranger* and *guest*.
 - Some languages separate connotations/denotations of *stranger*, from those of *guest*
4. *Host and stranger* have fixed conventional statuses, and associated roles.
 - A *stranger/guest* is always "one-down" (subordinate) in relation to a *host*.
 - A *host* is always "one-up" (superordinate) in relation to a *stranger/guest*
5. The *relationship* between *stranger/guest* and *host* is asymmetrical.
 - The relationship between *stranger* and *host* is built on *unequal authority*.
 - If the *stranger* knows his/her place, things proceed well, in *unequal mutuality*.
 - But the *stranger* is, first, second and perhaps always, *ambiguous*.
6. People of *dominant cultures* are used to treating *others as stranger* (and as *strange*).
 - Sometimes *strangers* are treated rather well: as *guests* in fact.
 - More often *strangers* are treated as *strange*: exotic, weird, abnormal, alien, inferior
7. People of *dominant cultures* often like to be treated as *guests*, but not as *strangers*.
 - They want to be favored, and they want some share of power.
 - Many cultures have proverbs like this: a *stranger/guest* is warmly welcome on day #1, tolerated on day #2, and expected to leave, or at least help out, on day #3!

B. TWO SCENARIOS: We distinguish: YOU as *stranger* and ME as *host*; and ME as *stranger* and YOU as *host*.

- ❑ When YOU are the *stranger*, I AM IN CONTROL, "one-up", superordinate.
 - I have more authority than you. You are always "one-down," subordinate.
 - I may be kind and indulgent, but I hold an initiative that you cannot. I am in charge.
 - You not only depend on me but are beholden to me.
- Left 'unredeemed,' this creates *internalized oppression* as among African-Americans, Irish, Jews, Native Americans, Hutus, and any systematically oppressed and subordinated people.
- ❑ When YOU are the *host*, I AM THE STRANGER, "one-down," subordinate.
 - I have less authority than you. You are always "one-up," superordinate.
 - I am not in control. I do not hold the initiative. You are in charge.
 - I not only depend on you but I am beholden to you.
- Left 'unredeemed,' this creates dominance by you, and dependence, even resentment, by me.

PARTICULAR APPLICATIONS

1. It's easy to see why the role of *host* rather than *stranger* is more congenial to certain people!
 - We are challenged, as Christians, not only to greet or care for the *stranger* as the other, but to risk **actually to become the stranger ourselves**: quite a radical proposition!
 - Jesus embodied both the role of *host* who embraced the stranger, and the role of *stranger* who did not cling to equality with God (Philipp 2:6-11).

2. Embracing both roles seems to
 - Prevent oppressive asymmetrical relationships.
 - Neutralize internalized oppression in the other.
 - Soften unwholesome dependency.
 - Create a community of equals. How does Jesus model this?
3. The example of Jesus:
 - As *host*:
 - He took initiatives, gathered people, served them, used his position to benefit all, and restored dignity/ identity to the outcast, the marginalized, the "other" -- *the stranger*.
 - *But* when he was *host* himself, he was also "one-up" and they were "one-down."
 - As *stranger*
 - He reveals himself as the *kenotic* Jesus, "one-down," the one who allows the other *to be the host* -- to take initiatives, to make choices, to be served.
 - As *stranger* himself, he was "one-down" his *host* was "one-up."
4. Two significant striking examples:
 - ❑ *On the road to Emmaus*:
 - ❑ Cleopas and his companion are portrayed as *insiders*, "one-ups."
 - ❑ Jesus is the outsider, stranger (*paroikos*), "one-down" (Lk 24:18).
 - ❑ It was precisely as *stranger* that Jesus enlightened the insiders, made them understand their own story, caused their hearts to burn, and gave them hope!
 - ❑ *Then* they returned to Jerusalem, renewed, as missionaries!
 - ❑ *Jesus, coming in Glory* (Mt 25).
 - ❑ Declares: 'I was hungry, naked, a *stranger* ... ' [and you?]
 - ❑ Not only must we respond to Jesus as the *stranger*, but we are called to *be the stranger*.
 - ❑ Being the *stranger* was an essential part of Jesus' pastoral identity.
 - ❑ This (*being stranger*) made Jesus "one-down," giving others the dignity of being "one-up."

D: SPIRITUALITY AND THE STRANGER

The Letter to the Hebrews is clear: we Christians have here no abiding city (13:14): we are resident aliens, birds of passage, strangers (biblically, *ger* rather than *nokri*). Our abiding city is in the hereafter.

To embrace the status/role of *stranger* is to embrace ambiguity, surrender, vulnerability. Yet **in that very self-emptying -- kenosis**, "one-down," subordinate status -- **mission becomes possible**. Some possibilities:

- ❑ A *stranger* has a different (not always better) history/ experience. *This can be shared with others*.
- ❑ A *stranger* brings other (not always better) resources, approaches – even solutions -- to common problems. *These can be shared with others*.
- ❑ A *stranger* can open up local microcosms, offering alternatives that are sometimes virtually life-giving.
- ❑ A *stranger* can represent solidarity, moral support, respect for local communities and people in spiritual, moral, or other crises, and may persuade others that s/he truly would not want to be anywhere else in the world. "There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."
- ❑ Every culture needs appropriate *strangers*. The (inevitable) tension between the "one-up" status of the insider (*host*) and the "one-down" status of the outsider (*stranger*) can be life-enriching for both parties.
- ❑ A *stranger* is to a community as a blood transfusion is to an individual: there is great potential as a life-giving force, but there is always a danger of contamination. Blood transfusions *can* kill people!
- ❑ A *stranger* (if non self-important, non authoritarian, supportive and vulnerable) can act as a plausible and trustworthy mediator between internal factions within a community.
- ❑ A *stranger* can never be and must never be the insider. It is in the relationship between insider and outsider, *host* and *stranger*, that creative tension is to be sought.
- A *fully-assimilated stranger* would lack the prophetic potential of the ambiguous, challenging, socially marginal, personally disinterested yet culturally and spiritually life-transmitting and life-propagating *stranger*.
- Can we, Christians in a post-modern, globalized world, many of whose people are exploited, victimized, and casualties of unjust systems, attempt the kind of self-emptying, *kenotic* ministry of Jesus (Philipp 2), which would help us to live a *preferential option for the poor*, that would not be tokenism or condescension, but true solidarity that would contribute to the well-being of all?

Anthony J. Gittins, CSSp.
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