Questions of
Religious Identity

Who Are You Facing Me?
Who Am I Facing You?

Terry Veling

This essay, a reflective inquiry about identity, draws heavily upon the insights of contemporary philosophers (Buber, Caputo, Derrida, Levinas) to explore the role of the other in our quest for identity. The author suggests that by our asking the question of “who” rather than “why” or “what” we come to deeper understanding of ourselves.

The question of “identity” and “difference” is one of the leading questions of our times. Even if only for the fact that we live in a pluralistic age, it seems obvious and necessary that this question should emerge as a central issue. As David Tracy suggests, we live in a “polycentric present.... There is no longer a center. There are many.... The others are not marginal to our center but centers of their own” (1994a, 4–5). The question of identity can no longer turn on “the one and the same,” but must now face “the other and the different.” Indeed, according to Tracy, the “turn to the other” is the quintessential turn of our times, giving shape to the central intellectual as well as ethical questions of our day. “The other and the different come forward now as the central intellectual categories across the major disciplines, including theology” (1994b, 108).

It seems to me that theology has always held as its “subject-matter” some tie or question or relation to the “other.” I am thinking particularly of the Jewish and

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Christian theological traditions that share Paul Ricoeur's description of religion as "the reference to an anteriority, an exteriority, and a superiority" (170). In other words, in asking questions of religious identity, we find ourselves continually deferring to the other who is always before us, beyond us, and higher than us. The religious question brings the question of otherness back to our memory ("Hear O Israel . . .").

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, identity is described as "the state of being the same in substance, nature, qualities, etc.; absolute sameness." And according to Martin Heidegger, language is important because "language is the house of being" (63). Dictionaries define our words and language shapes our existence—our very being—the very "house" or world we live in. And so I am led to wonder, is the question of identity primarily about "sameness," or is it deeply implicated in the question of the "other"? Have we become so enclosed in our "houses of being" that we have forgotten the face of the other, and we can no longer recognize the one who stands at the threshold of our existence?

The “Sins of Identity”

As a teacher of pastoral theology, one of my key roles is to help shape and nurture people's religious identity. In my situation, this basically boils down to a fairly simple question: "What does it mean to be a Catholic today, in this time and this place?" In one sense, this is a question we can never finally answer. Rather, it is one we must always go on asking ourselves. To ask the question of religious identity is to ask a searching, open, engaging question, one that requires us to continually reflect and act upon the call or vocation of the Christian tradition.

We cannot escape our past, our tradition, that which shapes our religious identity. Indeed, our religious tradition is a great gift—the gift of deep memories, communal stories, ethical wisdom. However, there is also a danger inherent in the formation of religious identities. Religion is one of the most powerful identity-forming agents known to humanity, and it is never far from the dangers of idolatry, as the Hebrew prophets knew so acutely. It can bind people into collective identities of "sameness" that close and seal themselves off from everything that is other and different. Indeed, Pope John Paul II's recent "Universal Prayer for the Confession of Sins" is a profound acknowledgment of Christianity’s "crimes against hospitality" (Derrida, 1999, 71). At various times throughout history, Catholic identity has fallen short of the great commandment to love, functioning instead "with attitudes caused by pride, by hatred, by the desire to dominate others, by enmity towards members of other religions" (John Paul II). By denying the gospel and "yielding to a mentality of power," members of the Church have "violated the rights of ethnic groups and peoples, and shown contempt for
their cultures and religious traditions.” They have sinned against women, immigrants, the poor, the people of the Covenant, and have been “guilty of attitudes of rejection and exclusion” (John Paul II).

The question of religious identity is vital, particularly when we face and acknowledge the sins we are capable of in the name of that very identity. Miroslav Volf asks us to consider the lethal logic operative when we too closely equate identity with “absolute sameness,” what he calls a “politics of purity” (74). The blood must be pure, the soil must be pure, the origins must be pure—one people, one culture, one religion, one language. What does not fall under this all-encompassing “oneness” is “polluting and dangerous” and must be removed. “Might not the will for identity,” writes Volf, “be fueling a good deal of the fifty or so conflicts around the globe? Various kinds of cultural ‘cleansings’ demand us to place identity and otherness at the center of theological reflection. . . . It may not be too much to claim that the future of our world will depend on how we deal with identity and difference” (17, 20). This type of “identitarianism” arouses our worst fears concerning the way in which identity can function as a self-protecting, homogenizing effort to exclude everything that is different, everything that is other—“to prevent the ‘other’ from crossing over ‘our’ borders, from taking ‘our’ jobs, from enjoying ‘our’ benefits and going to ‘our’ schools, from disturbing ‘our’ language, culture, religion and public institutions” (Caputo, 1997, 106–07).

This leads us to ask a very practical, relational question but a question of great size: How do we behave with the other in the major experiences of life? This is a personal, interpersonal, social, political, cultural, religious question. Where in our lives, our culture, our society, our political institutions, our neighborhoods, our workplaces, our churches, do we witness the “dangers of identity” and hear the “call of the other”?

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**In and Out:**

**The Language of Inclusion and Exclusion**

Given the exclusionary nature of a politics of purity, we may wonder whether the language of “inclusion” offers a better alternative. It seems an obvious choice. Indeed, the language of inclusion is “a major public story we like to tell about the modern democratic West—the story of progressive ‘inclusion.’ . . .

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The history of modern democracies is about progressive and ever expanding inclusion, about “taking in rather than . . . keeping out” (Volf, 58-59). We favor the word “include” rather than “exclude,” yet the definitions of the dictionary tell us that they share a surprisingly common root.

**Include**
- comprise or reckon in as part of the whole;
- shut in; enclosed;
- treat or regard as so comprised.

**Exclude**
- shut or keep out from a place, group, privilege, etc;
- expel and shut out;
- remove from consideration;
- prevent the occurrence of.

*Include, Exclude, Conclude*—all have at their root the Latin word *claudere*, which means “to shut.” Include—to shut in. Exclude—to shut out. Conclude—to shut down.

Our best instincts about human relations tell us that we do not want to include by “shutting in” just as much as we do not want to exclude by “shutting out.” We do not want anything to do with this “shutting in,” “shutting out” or “shutting down.” Rather, we want to keep ourselves and our relations open and welcoming to the other.

Typically, inclusion is read as a gathering together, assimilating, being one, part of the whole, a unity. Exclusion is read as a keeping apart, separating, dividing, expelling, casting off, leaving out. So that by exclusion we usually mean that which is outside the inclusive norm, that which does not fit, that which is errant—and for this reason needs to be brought back in, into the whole, included, so that we can feel safe in our inclusionary worlds. However, maybe the “excluded” do not want to be “included” in the ways we think. Maybe we need to let go of our desire to always include, and pay more attention to the other that desires to be freed from our all-inclusive embrace?

If we go back to the *Oxford English Dictionary* and look up the word “face,” we find the following:

**Face**
- the front of the head from the forehead to the chin;
- the expression [speaking] of the face;
- the surface of a thing, especially as regarded or approached;
- a person;
- look or be positioned towards;
Face-to-face: neither inclusion nor exclusion. Rather, both that which we regard, approach, welcome, turn toward—and that which presents itself to us, confronts us, speaks to us. This is the living space “between us” that respects the right distance of the face-to-face relation.

Thinking with the help of the dictionary reminds me of another attempt I made—this time as a teacher in class—to express or evoke a thought that is indebted to the work of Emmanuel Levinas (1969, 1991, 1998). I placed on the floor a dozen or so black and white photographs of various faces. The faces represented the plurality of our world, each one expressing different cultural backgrounds and different conditions of human existence. Then, I took a huge blanket and threw it over all these singularly expressive faces so that they were completely covered. The blanket represents what Levinas fears most—the totality of thinking that attempts to “cover” everything. It is like a grand inclusive narrative that is big enough and large enough to contain and encompass all that is, so that everything is “covered”—with nothing left outside this all-encompassing worldview. However, the blanket, which strives to cast its narrative hold over everything, actually smothers, covers and obliterates the faces. The Levinasian moment happens when this smothering blanket is actually lifted up and removed and all of a sudden the faces stand out—exposed, radiant, revealed, open, upright, facing. Indeed, this lifting of the blanket is akin to the revelatory moment for Levinas. It is when the face of the other “appears” and the call to ethical relationship “happens”—when the singularity of the face stands out against totalizing narratives that cover, smother, blanket and obliterate.

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Jesus and the other

This concern and regard for the unique face of the other goes to the heart of the prophetic and ethical message of Jesus’ life and teaching. His ministry was deeply shaped by the Hebraic concern for hospitality to the “stranger, the widow, and the orphan” (Levinas, 1969: 77, 215), the displaced and oppressed. His “table ministry” (“he eats with sinners”) encapsulates the heart of his hospitality. Jesus did not subsume people into the larger system. He preached and enacted a kingdom based on the irreducibility of the human person. His spirituality was
profoundly relational and ethical—not the dissolution of the one into the Same, but attention and relation to the other. According to John Caputo, the basileia preached by Jesus is a “kingdom of singularities” built on love and forgiveness and relationship to one another:

What better embodiment of such a “kingdom of singularities” than the biblical kingdom itself, where God has counted every tear, numbered every hair on our heads, where God knows every secret nestled in someone’s heart, where every least little nobody in the kingdom is precious beyond measure [which is the only measure of love]. In short, where every other is wholly other? The kingdom is a kingdom of singularities. . . . The kingdom is the kingdom of God, Who is love, not (just) (Greek) Being. Nobody ever said, “When you pray, say Being.” Being is not an abba. Love is the element and the energy of the kingdom, the light and the air, the open and the clearing, the momentum and the vigor, so that in the kingdom we live and move and have our being in love . . . (Caputo, 1997a: 140, 229).

As though religion meant “attention to the other,” as though we might open our dictionaries and read this definition of religion: “being-for-the-other.” This is not just philosophy’s “Being” or even the onto-theological “Ground of Being”—rather, this is “Being-For.” According to this definition, the “house of being” is a house of hospitality, a house of welcome, a house of “being-for-the-other.”

**Before the Other: The Question of “Who?”**

Who? is a very unusual question. It is not a question that typically springs to mind, even though it is one of our most fundamental questions. Rather than Who?, questions like “why?” or “what?” or “how?” usually claim most of our attention. However, Who? is a particularly generative question for thinkers that recognize the primacy of the face-to-face relation, that pay attention to the inter-subjective or dialogical contours of human life, and attend to the claims of the other in our world.

Questions of any large measure or size are such that we are never finally finished with them, nor they with us. As Hans-Georg Gadamer suggests, it is not so much we who raise questions; rather, questions arise or present themselves to us: “A question presses itself on us; we can no longer avoid it and persist in our accustomed opinion” (366). Questions are always unsettling; they never let us settle-down. Who? is particularly unique in this regard because it never leaves me alone. It is a persistent and pervasive question that never lets me be. It never leaves me just to myself, never lets me be just me. Rather, Who? is a question that
always places me before an other. There is always someone else, someone other than me. This is a deep intuition of Who?—that we are never left alone, never just ourselves, that my existence is always implicated, always tied to an other or, if you like, always in relation.

Who? is the question that grasped Martin Buber so much, more than “what?” or “why?” Buber brought this question back to life. He took our gaze off ourselves and turned it toward the face of the other. Indeed, Buber saw this as the primary task of the question Who?—to turn our gaze from ourselves to You—because he knew that Who? and You are inseparable. He joined them in this way: I-Thou, I-You (Buber). Who? always places me in relationship with the “thou,” with You. It is a question that is impossible to ask in a vacuum or a void; rather Who? always ties me to the presence of the other. Who? persists because of You. In other words, whenever I ask the question Who?, I know you are there facing me.

This is yet another deep intuition of Who?—that it doubles as both question and address. If Who? is there, then I am called to respond. Who? always unsettles indifference by placing me in question, asking me to respond, to answer. My existence is heavy with necessity in the face of this question. I cannot remain indifferent. I have to respond—like a telephone that rings, or a knock at the door, or a person calling out my name. Who? is calling. Who? is knocking. Who? is asking after me. Who? is there. I feel compelled to pick up the telephone, to open the door, to answer, to turn around, to say, “Here I am.” Thinkers such as Levinas and Buber recognize that the essence of the question Who? always involves an other, that it is always a question that invokes response, that calls forth responsibility. This is why Who? is such a beautiful-ethical-open question, compared to “what?” or “why?”—questions that never need implicate me, that can always leave me off the hook. “Who is there?” is a question that always commands my response. “Who? is there” is a presence that never leaves me alone.

Who? is not a question that can be satisfied within the realms of my own being. Rather, it is a question that opens out to the “miracle of exteriority . . . to have an outside, to listen to what comes from outside” (Levinas, 1990, 29). Who? always leads toward You. Thus it is both distance and proximity, taking me outside of my world and away from myself, yet moving toward You who is always there before me. Another way of saying this is that Who? is the question of transcendence that is always close to me, or as Levinas says, “transcendence has no meaning except by way of an I saying You” (1998, 147).
Augustine and the Question of Who

But who are you? This is a question that fills the pages of St. Augustine’s Confessions, perhaps one of our earliest and finest testimonies of “an I saying You.” “How does one who does not know you call upon you?” asks Augustine (43). “Or must you be called upon so that you may be known?” (43). “What is it then that I love when I love you?” (233). “To what place do I call you . . . or from what place can you come to me?” (44). The questions multiply throughout Augustine’s Confessions as he exposes every aspect and every intimacy of his life to this “unaddressable thou.” “You” is everywhere present in his text, and nowhere more so than in the wake of his questions: Who are you? Where are you? From where do you come? Who do I love when I love you?

Of course, we know that Augustine is addressing himself to God, confessing and testifying to God—to You—the “knower” (229) who faces me, yet without my knowing who is facing me, who God is. You has too many places, too many faces, is everywhere in my memory and even before my memory, in “an immemorial past” (Levinas, 1986, 355). Who are you? My mother, my father, my brothers? My kindred one, my sons, my friends? My neighbor next door or the stranger on the street? Those who have died and gone before me? The Ancient One, the Ancient of Days? A word, the Word? Or the You who gazes from the icon hanging above my desk; or the You who binds the sad lovers in Picasso’s “Couple”; or the You I hear in Górecki’s “Miserere”; or the You I feel in the silence of blue mountains and grey mist; or the You of my prayers and sorrow and desire; or the You of Celan’s poetry. . . . “you in the multi-night encountered, you, multi-you” (Celan, 191).

You are everywhere there, of which God functions as “the apex of vocabulary” (Levinas, 1991, 156). You are everywhere there, of which Augustine asks, “Quid ergo amo, cum Deum meum amo?” As Jacques Derrida suggests, we are all the time trying to translate this question in our lives, “What do I love, whom do I love, that I love above all?” (1993, 122). Who are you that I love, that I desire, that fills my life with passion and yearning? Who are you that is “in all” and “above all”? Who are you that calls out to me, and calls upon my passion to be a compassion for the one who suffers and is in need of me?

Transcendence

Much of the religious soul in the West has been captured by a radical “immanentism” whereby any talk of God’s otherness or revelation or transcendence seems offensive to our intelligence. We are allergic to transcendence. “But the paradox of faith,” writes Derrida, “is that interiority remains incommensurable with exteriority” (1995a, 63). Especially for the prophetic traditions of Judaism and Christianity, attention to the voice of the other is always a pivotal moment in the announcement and advent of God. The openness of Who? welcomes the other’s transcendent exteriority, and serves as the template for God’s relationship.
to the self. For we do not know whether the You who breaks into our world is the face of our neighbor or is the “wholly other” of the divine. We do not know which is an example of which, “whether God is an example of something else, or everything is an example of God, an imago dei” (Caputo, 1997a, 58).

What we do know is that I am being addressed, that against the tranquilized world of immanence, I find myself awakened to the voice of the other who calls from beyond. Leaving behind the question of being and meaning, which usually means the meaning of my existence, I am faced by You—and here everything matters. “I tremble,” writes Derrida, “at what exceeds my seeing and my knowing although it concerns the inner-most parts of me, right down to my soul, down to the bone, as we say” (1995a, 54). Even with the one closest to me, I find myself saying: “I will never fully understand my relationship with you. It forever eludes me. In this sense, you are a stranger and you are infinite. Yet, even though I do not understand, I know it matters.” It is not meaning that makes things matter, but You—the other. You make it matter. Not “why?”—which is always tied to totalities and grand schemas of meaning, but “Who?”—which is always tied to me-in-relation-to-the-other. This is what matters.

Another? The other! Ah, the other, here is the name of the mystery, the name of You, the desired one. . . . The other to love. The other who puts love to the test: How to love the other, the strange, the unknown, the “not-me-at-all?” (Cixous, 140).

**Conclusion**

As a teacher of pastoral theology, I find myself wondering whether the question of otherness (not identity) comes to us via tradition, and the question of identity comes to us (not from our tradition), but from the other. Tradition brings us face to face with the question of otherness: Who are You facing me? In my teaching, I always try to keep this question alive and engaged in our class conversation and learning. The sacred texts, symbols, commentaries and revelatory events of our tradition continually engage and provoke our attention, addressing our lives, placing us before the claims of the other. Who are you that faces me? Who are you that addresses me, speaks to me? This is the mystical-prophetic question of tradition. Who are you—the stranger, the unknown, the neighbor, the poor one, the Holy one, the one who is always other-than-me? Tradition breaks open our closed worlds of identity and turns us to face the other who calls from beyond.

The other, in turn, brings us face to face with the question of identity: Who am I facing you? It seems vital that students of pastoral theology pay attention to this question of identity, which is the question of vocation—the call to service.
and responsibility. The question of our identity comes to us not from ourselves but from the other. Indeed, my identity is put in question by the other. Who am I facing you? The other asks about me, asks after me, calls out to me, urges me to respond, to answer, to open my door, to turn around, to say: “Here I am.” The other elicits my identity as response. What matters is not so much the declaration of my existence that says, “Here I am,” but the “Here I am” that is the response of my existence to the call of the other. Wherever we find people saying “Here I am”—not as an assertion or declaration of their existence—but as a response, then we are witnessing a testimony to the voice of the other that commands from beyond (Levinas, 1985, 109).

You can see I am playing a little here, putting tradition in service of the other, in the Name of the other, in the Name of God, rather than in the name of the self, in the name of identity. And I am placing our identity as a response to the other, whereby we know who we are, who we must be, because of the other who calls out and asks after us, asks us to be—not first for ourselves—but for the stranger, the friend, the victim, the neighbor. To me, this is what it means to love God and neighbor, the first and greatest commandment.

References


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