

Sören ASMUS

I am More than you Think:

Fragments and Diversity within Oneself

In order to approach the notion of identity and to overcome the idea of a dualistic either/or thinking in this regard, it might be useful to confront patterns of thinking with the reality in which we find ourselves. In the last decades some developments in the areas of theology and sociology might help to think of identity in a different manner. Thus, I will try to deal with two strong images of identity, which I call the seed model and the core model, confronting them with insights from theologians Dietrich BONHOEFFER and Henning LUTHER, the sociology of Anthony GIDDENS and the works of Amin MAALOUF.

LIFE – A FRAGMENT?

“Besides, our generation cannot now lay claim to such a life as was possible in yours – a life that can find its full scope in professional and personal activities, and achieve balance and fulfilment. That is perhaps the greatest sacrifice that we, younger people, with the example of your life still before our eyes, are called on and compelled to make, and it makes us particularly aware of the fragmentary and incomplete nature of our own.” “The important thing today is that we should be able to discern from the fragment of our life how the whole was arranged and planned, and what material it consists of.” (Letters to the Parents, 20th and 23rd February, 1944)

Dietrich BONHOEFFER wrote these sentences in prison. His resistance against the Nazi ideology within the Confessing church and the liberal resistance made him realise that he – as many of his generation – would most likely not be able to achieve what they were aiming for.

In a German upper class family of his time, it was the main achievement to develop and fulfil one’s own possibilities and thereby allow the individual to regard her or his own identity as something like a seed which grows, is nurtured and challenged, and step by step tends towards fulfilment and perfection.

His notion of the “Fragments of Life”, of the challenge to interpret the little we see in the sense of the potential and options which are hinted at in our lives, even though we will not be able to reach it, all this for him was a loss. It was a painful realisation, but at the same time, his life and his works tended to prove his idea right: His Life was a fragment, but out of what he left us, many Christians afterwards were able to develop new insights and new ways of thinking.

IDENTITY AS FRAGMENTS

Some fifty years later, Henning LUTHER, who died from HIV/AIDS, picked up this notion of “Fragments of Life” in his works on identity. In his rather postmodern aesthetical

theology he described our identity as fragmented. Death – as the open wound of nothingness – makes our life a fragment in three ways:

1. As a fragment from the past, because we always carry with us the ruins of our history, the unfulfilled dreams and hopes, the unused opportunities of life, the missed chances. There are our failures, violations, losses. All of them lead to the pain of the fragment. Each part of our life is generally not only growing and a benefit, becoming an increasingly mature personality; it is as well a breach and a loss of unrealised hopes and dreams of the past.

2. As a fragment of the future, because we always have the hope of further development. There is a longing to go beyond the present state of being. The difference between the fragment and its possible perfection is not only negative; it also points towards something new, something that might be or may be. At each stage of our life we are also drafts for the future. We are like building-sites of which we do not know whether or how they will be built for the future. We only know that it is not completed yet. Against any form of stagnation there is longing, an ever new movement of beginning of transcending one’s own state of being.

3. As a fragment of our relations to other people, more precisely the limitation of the possibility to meet other people. In each step of our personal development, we are challenged and questioned by others. Each encounter with the other poses the question: “Who am I?” We are only ourselves if we are open to and vulnerable to others. It is the encounter with the Other which makes us unique: only when being addressed or called by the Other we become unmistakably unique, because in this situation it is only me, who is called to answer the request. The encounter with the other always contains the experience



of suffering, where we encounter the limited, needing, vulnerable, and alienated other.

SORROW AND SUFFERING

In this sense, although the being as a fragment contains sorrow and suffering, it also allows for hope and the longing for transcendence. The idea of perfection however, the platonic aim of finding oneself and the perfect fitting other in one's life, would only be possible if we gave up the possibility of sorrow, of hope and suffering, thereby making ourselves into something like the stones in a river bed: being polished and formed by the running waters, but without individual shape and softness. In looking at the Cross, LUTHER argues, Christ in His suffering is also the image of the fragmented, not the perfect. So if the Cross is the symbol of our salvation, it is not the perfection but the fragment, which brings us to Christ.

Henning LUTHER realises, that to live a life of perfection and wholeness – although we still might be brought up with the longing for such a life – would only be possible if we could give up the ability to feel sorrow, to have hope and to love, just as isolated existences. The realisation of life as a fragment is the true human form of being and having an identity. This insight, however, does not liberate us from the question of how we should be able to hold these fragments together as a single identity.

Since the notion of the identity-seed growing and developing allowed us to depict ourselves as the "present state" of this development, it gave the impression that in each step of our development we would be the "same" and therefore to be recognised in our uniqueness in what we did, said and were at any time of our life. If, however, the notion of fragment is the more adequate, then how are we recognisable, and how then do we hold all these fragments of our life together, if they are not "broken branches" but the basic elements of our identity?

THINK OF WHO YOU ARE

In the "high- or late-modern" times we find ourselves in – the British Sociologist, Anthony GIDDENS argues – the Self, the way I am able to perceive my identity has become a reflexive project, as well as the whole of modernity.

It is up to the combination of the ability to develop trust, to relate to others and to find a meaningful approach to the things I am doing, while still being in the need to reshape the way I am interacting with the surrounding world. The choices of "lifestyle" are necessary for the individual, as there is no longer a given pattern within "tradition," "manner," or "class" that allows the individual to refer to as a legitimising argument for her or his actions.

GIDDENS explains: "In the

post-traditional order of modernity, and against the backdrop of new forms of mediated experience, self-identity becomes a reflexively organised endeavour. The reflexive project of the self, which consists of sustaining coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives, takes place in the context of multiple choices as filtered through abstract systems. In modern social life, the notion of lifestyle takes on particular significance. Reflexively organised life-planning, which normally presumes consideration of risks as filtered through contact with expert knowledge, becomes a central feature of the structuring of self-identity."

THE WAY WE TELL OUR STORY

In this sense, we develop our identity through the way we tell our story. The changing circumstances, new insights or objectives we choose – or feel forced to choose – and our experiences and media-transmitted ideas constantly make us rethink our identity, reshape it by new choices and tell new stories, depicting our life as we are perceiving it now.

This ability to tell our story in a coherent biographical manner includes the realisation of our fragmentedness, as new choices shape new life-perspectives, in which we leave behind other previously existing options. The way we tell our story is dependent on storytelling patterns we find around us.

Here another problem arises, especially in those situations where the normal pattern of storytelling is no longer valid or requested. In the case of refugees in Germany the need to tell the complete story of violation, conflict and all, including especially all details of shameful aggression at the first interview with a German immigration officer does usually not fit to the cultural reality the refugees were used to before. You do not tell stories of abuse and humiliation in the first instance to a complete stranger – but German law does not ask for the cultural or personal limits; it wants a statement which includes "all relevant facts" of the life of the person, regarding relevant only those which could serve as a cause to apply for political asylum.

Here we realise that it is very often the challenge from outside which seems to force us not to reflect upon all that is us, but to reduce ourselves to such features which seem to be of relevance for us, or for the way we are perceived for our "identity".

I AM MORE THAN YOU THINK

In the book *In the Name of Identity – Violence and the Need to Belong* the French-Lebanese author Amin MAALOUF describes two useless questions he experiences when being asked



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about his identity. The first is whether he feels more French or more Lebanese, and he has to answer: both, as he was brought up in Lebanon in a French-speaking school, now living and writing in France but reflecting upon the culture of both Europe and the Arab world. In his books he quite often depicts characters which cross the cultural and religious boundaries of their times, and which sometimes form the only element of coherence of the stories told. Thus the either/or question does not do justice to the lives of many people, while still it seems to be the first question to ask when faced with difference.

The other "false question" is the one of the "core belief": when having explained the different elements that form his identity, people demand to reduce the complexity of life: "But deep down inside how do you feel, more this or more that?" This reduction of the multitude of elements, forcing someone to reduce her- or himself to just one element, is at the basis of violence and hatred among people struggling for defining their place in different societies.

MULTITUDE AND RICHNESS

Instead of trying to reduce oneself to be "only" a Muslim, "only" a scientist, or "only" an Italian, thereby cutting off all that is not comparable, MAALOUF encourages the readers of his books to sit and meditate and cherish all the different elements that form oneself, to be proud of the multitude and richness of experiences, memories, and beliefs which make one unique in the way she or he has and will develop.

The alternatives he points out are clearly the ones between violence, which develops by being reduced to a single feature, which is neither doing justice to her or his inner richness nor to reality. When reducing ourselves, however, we already apply violence towards ourselves, in order to suppress all other elements of our identity and therefore long for the "reward," which is the belonging to a community and achieving a place to be.

If this "reward" is not granted, this violence and pain we have applied towards ourselves is turned to those we perceive as either hindering us from becoming part of what we suffered for, or those we perceive as the reason for our reduced identity to be challenged. In order to avoid this aggressive reaction, he argues for the view on identity, which is basically all this, which is not comparable, as it is the combination of all we are, which makes us, who we really are. Instead of giving false answers to false questions, we have to confront us and others with a richness which is more than others think we are.

IDENTITIES OF PILGRIM PEOPLE

I was brought up with the dreams of the seed and the core. They have proven to be quite successful. It was thanks to the experiences in WSCF, at the university in Germany and Ireland and to some losses in my own private life, that I had to realise how little these images are able to explain.

Instead, they have long proven to add to the pain of loss, frustration, and the feeling of not being able to tell who I am. Trying to understand the

images of the fragments and the reflexive way to tell my identity, holding together most of the multitude of elements which make me unique, life has become a little less frustrating.

The Christian faith holds in its midst the idea that it is not really clear what we are: *"For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."* (1Cor 13,12) In this sense it seems to me that the idea of the fragment and of the richness is more compatible to this faith.

As we are called to live our lives as being on our way to an aim which we will not fulfil, but which is promised to us, we might as well learn to develop the identity of a pilgrim people: the awareness that we do not "hold an identity", but we are called to become what we are not yet. The theologian, pedagogue and reformer, Jan Amos KOMENSKÝ (COMENIUS), being a migrant for most of his life, expressed this attitude:

"I thank my God, Who has wanted that I shall be a man of longing for all my life. I praise Thee, my saviour, that You have given me on Earth no native country and no home. Thereby You saved me from the folly to mistake the accidental for the substantial, the way for the aim, the striving for the peace, the shelter for the home, the wandering for the native country."

Suggested Reading

- ASMUS Sören, *I is an Other – Dialogue as First Theology, Emanuel Levinas and Henning Luther as Sources for Ecumenical Theology*. Dublin, 1996. (A copy is available via email, if requested.)
- BONHOEFFER Dietrich, *Letters and Papers from Prison. The Enlarged Edition*. London, 1971.
- GIDDENS Anthony, *Modernity and Self-Identity – Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge – Oxford, 1994.
- LUTHER Henning, *Religion und Alltag – Bausteine zu einer Praktischen Theologie des Subjekts*. Stuttgart, 1992.
- MAALOUF Amin, *In the Name of Identity – Violence and the Need to Belong*. London–New York, 2005.

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