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Otherness and the Experience of Difference: From Encountering and Evaluating to Eschewing or Enduring

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The muezzin makes the last call to prayer and some men make their way to the small neighborhood mosque. Three blocks away, twelve women loiter for sex; men are also making their way to them. What is there to make of this ostensibly divergent movement and the chasm of morality it appears to represent? Much is made of the difference, but what seems to protect one from the other is the very understanding of difference, that both are “Other” and therefore distant, unrelated, and unnecessary.

— Field notes, June 2007, Istanbul

An unavoidable aspect of community is the creation of the *other* to distinguish those who belong from those who do not. The utility of this process is far reaching; it encompasses domains of personal safety as well as the preservation of moral certainty. “Modern” individual “free will” actors, as well as members of more traditionally oriented communities for whom “free will” is a less operative concept, all live within groups. Though the nature of what binds a group is varied, the boundaries that constitute a group become concretized through membership and affiliation. There is an aspect of openness that allows like-members to be included in a group, but this openness cannot be endlessly inclusive, lest membership be meaningless and the group be characterless and too amorphous. In addressing the challenge of living together in the face of what seems to be a social fact—that differences are unavoidable and built into the very nature of how social communities are defined, of who is inside and who is outside—there is a process of recognizing otherness and assessing difference. Yet the outcomes of living with otherness are not predetermined. Furthermore, awareness of how this process develops constitutes one step toward living together in a world of difference.

From Encounter to Pivotal Response

Othering happens. It is learned at an early age through finding out with whom we can play and with whom we cannot. Over time these early aspects of

prejudices and affinities become framed by moral scaffolds, and by the time they do, they are often ingrained so as to be accepted as fact. The building of otherness surrounds us and is part and parcel of sociality. Though it may come with the baggage of prejudice, knowing the other begins with the first encounter. *Encounters* with individuals in our environment involves, both actively and passively, a realization or unearthing of variation; discovery of difference that is perceived along a continuum from negligible to threatening.

This encounter with difference can be instantaneous or protracted over the course of countless meetings, but it always leads to an *evaluation* of difference. The evaluation of our surroundings involves the rational alongside the irrational. It also involves an assessment that is pragmatically contextualized in relation to the needs of the individual and the obligations felt toward the community of membership, or primary affiliation. As an individual is taken outside of his or her affinity group and the support network that reinforces individual biases, a certain trajectory of the evaluation process develops. When a relationship begins, most aspects of friction are overlooked for the pleasure of appreciating the newness of place

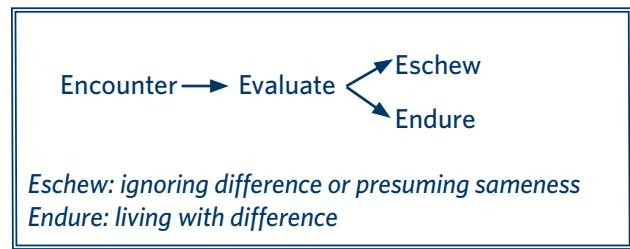
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and efforts to establish affinity within the newly formed group. However, as the newness of the relationship fades, differences become increasingly problematic. Yet, the hope for truly living with difference hinges not on its denial but in opting to endure it. The often acclaimed reconciliation of difference, as the path towards coexistence, does not always represent the *good* it is presumed to be.

The pivotal point in social relations is what is done in response to the encounter and subsequent evaluation of difference, where differences are either *eschewed* or *endured*. The eschewal of difference can be either a complete disassociation of the other from any social engagement or the overlooking of difference in deference to imagining sameness. The former mode—of distancing oneself so far as to cease engagement—is akin to building a wall and closing the door. In essence, it is the end of a conversation. The latter variant of eschewal is one that is predicated on the (often false) idea of an ultimate sameness that, if searched for ardently enough, erodes the barriers of difference. This second approach is common to many interfaith peacebuilding initiatives that attempt to build dialogue and a foundation for overcoming religious difference by emphasizing a shared Abrahamic ancestry. Despite a common heritage, this is not enough to embrace the pervasive reality of real, nonnegotiable difference; replacing difference with a pseudo-sameness is of suspect utility, for it dangerously fails to take as real the lived categories of religious difference. One only needs to think of how relations between coreligionists fall apart around the differences between understandings of *doxa* and *praxis*, to know that shared claims to Abraham are, for practical purposes, insufficient.

Another evaluative option toward approaching difference is the realization of it being unsettling, uncomfortable, yet unavoidable. Within the context of religion, this enduring of difference both recognizes the nonnegotiable nature of many cosmological orientations and accepts that the eschewal of wall building is unsustainable in an increasingly interconnected world. At some levels, this contains the notion of tolerance with regard to that with which one disagrees and finds distasteful or reprehensible. At a linguistic level it captures the nature of the project being undertaken: differences that matter are not to be eschewed lightly, but endured. At first blush, this is a harder position to sell than a narrative of oneness and unified harmony, but in a world of complex and increasingly interrelated associations, it is the most tenable approach.

{diagram: approaching difference}



The pivotal moment in a relationship between individuals and group members is the decision to eschew or endure difference, a decision that is continually faced as circumstances change. Although much of this is cognitively tied to the evaluative step, it is also not an altogether active process. The hegemonic space in which these decisions progress influences behavior, though at some points it is nonreflective and plays out in our doing (or avoiding doing) things together. This inherently influences the trajectory of conflict, which can be endless in opportunity and pervasive in social existence. When diverse communities engage with one another in a neighborhood, the possibility is open for the advancement of multiple meanings among multiple communities. This is the intersubjective realization of the move from eschewal to difference.

Approaching the Pivot Through an Experience from Turkey

The theoretical is informed, and in fact arrived at, through the experiential, through attempts to make generalizable sense of the particular. Moving to the practical level of lived experience, the 2007 International Summer School on Religion and Public Life held in Turkey can be described as an experiment in encountering difference. A group of twenty-seven fellows constituting converging worlds of difference was brought together for a fortnight of encountering the other. The group members came from different countries, cultures, and religious professions, thus bringing different experiential worldviews. While diversity is often advanced as a virtue in Western liberal parlance, the constitution of such a group in no way predetermined social harmony. Though an interest in the experiential process of the school was something shared, this paled in comparison to the historical tensions among the communities represented by the participants.

Two trajectories of difference were at play that influenced group dynamics. First, there was the background of societal differences, which for many represented a cultural environment of unfamiliar words, smells, sights, and societal histories justifying

inclusion and exclusion. Turkey—with its Ottoman past, secular and Islamist tensions over the state, and wounds of ethnic conflict—resonated to varying degrees with the fellows' experience. The second variable of difference was the group itself, which had largely been pulled out of its affinity groupings. The temporary excision from one's home-identity group and engagement with others allowed for reflection on prejudices and the self without having to immediately commit to the collective biases familiar in the setting of home. As such, there was newness, openness, and vulnerability in the initial meetings. This pleasurable period of newness and openness soon gave way to a period of evaluation, which was often accompanied by the attempt to eschew difference in a set of assumptions on shared communality. The very practice of actually doing things together (the stuff of the Summer School itself, our learning and living, and eating and sharing together) however, opened up the often irreconcilable nature of our differences. This, in turn, presented the possibility of learning to endure difference (not that we all did so, or managed to do so all the time). Yet, our achievement is that we did manage to model the possibility of such a response, so critical to maintaining difference in our increasingly interconnected world.

The first among these shared experiences was a visit to the Patriarchal (Orthodox) Church in Phanar with Jews (Reform, Conservative, Orthodox), Christians (Orthodox, Protestants, Roman Catholics), Muslims (Sunni, Alevi, Ismaili), and those who did not identify with a religious tradition. This presented a particular tension between those who saw the service as an environment facilitating a connection with the sacred and those who saw it in an anthropological light. We were spending much of our time trying to find connections of sameness that would give us a modicum of familiarity with each other, but because of our different religious backgrounds we came to the service with different capacities for appreciating it. The service had aspects of formality in the rituals and high liturgy but also informality in the coming and going of congregants; the directions given throughout the service by the clerics; and the continual photography that gave it a sense of theatrical performance. What could be understood and shared by everyone was only the process of having been to the service, not the meaning of the service or the cosmological door it presumably opened to some of the participants.

In visiting the Patriarchal Church in Phanar, part of the issue was the seeming disconnectedness felt by being *other*, by being outside the community of

congregants. In part, this can be associated with the difficulty of sustaining a feeling of connectedness, a relation. Though the difference the service presented to a Protestant, Orthodox Jew, or Sunni Muslim was far from the same, some participants could share the desire for the service to be 30 minutes rather than 3 hours; an appreciation of art and ornament; or the basic experience of observing something different. But this sharing was very different than what presumably was shared by the Orthodox participants. We were encountering our differences.

Later, while visiting the Armenian Patriarchate, we saw that hard questions, sometimes aggressively asked, brought to light different communicatory styles, culturally different expectations of the group members toward our hosts, and questions of how the group should internally regulate itself. The same applied to our visit to leaders of an Islamic group the following day. We were not yet a group in the sense of experiences having solidified our shared commitment to each other, but we were experiencing the challenges of having differing expectations of social codes that are often not as universal as we would like to assume. We had yet to develop a level of trust that would allow us to translate what we were experiencing into words with meanings that could be shared equally. The politically correct answers given by the Armenian Patriarchate regarding the Armenian Genocide question; the message of Islam presented by the members of M. Fethullah Güllen's movement; or the encounter with Orthodox Christian rituals that were meaningful for some and merely exotic to others, all represented experiences to be processed for meaning. But in ruminating over the codes of conduct for talking with others—avoiding aggression that confronts a host in a way that is beyond what could politely be expected—we began to formulate ourselves as a group. Representatives from the Armenian Patriarchate and Güllen's movement were not in a position to tell us about their innermost feelings on the Turkish state and national and religious feelings because too much was at stake and too little was to be gained. Groups of difference often find parallels in such calculations, not knowing how much to risk in sharing with someone clearly outside of the self-identified interest group; our group was no exception. We were all in the process of evaluating our differences.

The pains of being in a group that constituted such difference played out in many settings, but two I mention here were representative of the religious and national questions posed by being together.

With time together leading us beyond introductions and toward familiarity, differences became increasingly clear and uncomfortable. Being hosted by the Alevi community, the very nature of Islamic identity was challenged for some Muslims in the group who, at various levels struggled to accept the legitimacy of Alevis as coreligionists. This made all too clear that the “Muslim” category in the group was anything but precise when it came to the margins of what was seen as the nature, or essence, of a religious identity. In the same way Jews (Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox) in the group struggled over the question of counting women as part of the minyan, the Muslims in the group struggled over issues that mattered at a deeply personal, intimate, and cosmological level. Some Sunnis refused to eat the food of the Alevis and some went through a process of othering the Alevis in the classical way of advancing an orthodox-heretic dichotomy.

The same happened when ethnic categories were raised and members of our group recited diverse experiences of the Kurdish question, ranging from the experience of Kurdish persecution to claims of Turkish vilification. The pains of having different realities—seen most vividly when forced into being recognized or articulated in the ways of practice—brought strain to the definition of a pluralist group and the easiest way to resolve the problem was to downplay it or attempt to create an all encompassing category to eschew it. Although Sunnis and Alevis can be Muslims in the understanding of Christians or Jews, they are not always seen as such within the “Muslim” collective. Likewise, in Turkey, encompassing Kurds as being Turks by nature of being a Turkish citizen is clearly different than the rub of distinction that is politicized as Turkish-Kurds and Turkish-Armenians experiencing the state in a way that Turks in majority do not.

To eschew the difference is, in part, the trope upon which sameness is built. But as the closeness of the group made poignant, the thin and unstable ground of building an inter-group relationship on what can be shared overlooks the practical fact that so much cannot be shared. There are strains to defining the group and not everyone can be satisfied. But such is the nature of group membership; people cannot be completely pushed outside if there is to be sustainable relations. Setting boundaries is essential to establishing the other and establishing the group. But the difficulty, and success, of bringing a group together is seen in the distrust and reservations that yield to eventual moments of connection and collective experiences, which create glimpses of ways we

can live and work together in spite of our differences. One of the challenges becomes respecting the boundaries and yet finding ways not to diminish them or belittle them, but rather to move beyond them, to make points of connection, of relatedness; not sameness, but associatedness.

As the two weeks went by, it cannot be said with any certainty how many of the fellows returned to the comfort of their communities to advocate enduring the other as an approach to difference, but by the end of our time together it had become the operative approach in our engagement with one and the other. Arguably, this allowed us to develop a more substantive appreciation for each other. When the Summer School started, there was a belief that by participating in the same program we constituted a group; by the time it was over, we saw that the only way to really become a group was through struggling to share experiences that led us to endure difference through an individual decentering of the self.

When enduring difference, modest progress is made in encountering the other in a way that is decentering; we are forced to evaluate the other and our own stereotypes with a seriousness seldom seen in the practice of everyday life. We generally eschew the other, though in reality we have to endure the other as well as the difference he or she embodies. In so doing we are presented with a choice. The default, perhaps, is to retreat to our own communities of identification. We can also take stock of having experienced the difference of the other—and being decentered by it—and make the other part of our group. There is hope in the latter approach, because it acknowledges that we all have suffered and recognizes that discounting the validity of another’s experience is both self-serving and myopic. We tend to bring assumptions and prejudices to our everyday lives that, in a normative stance, occlude most efforts to objectively assess ourselves. These are the limits of discussion in which we reference ourselves back to a familiar domain and a general insistence of walking within such restricted parameters. By living with shared experience and something close to shared memories, the value of and livability in enduring difference lays the foundation for expanding the pursuits of tolerance.

Conclusion

There is no way out of a world of others. The way in which prejudices and affinities play out in relationships is often the focus of conflict and discourse

about conflict, with little attention given to the micro-negotiations of living with the other—of crossing daily boundaries of difference—that contribute significantly to peaceful coexistence. This acknowledges something about social relations and societies in general: difference is othering, unpalatable, and disliked. Those on the fringe of society—migrant workers, prostitutes, ethnic and religious minorities, or individuals othered by the majority—may find themselves on the margins because of economic inequalities or social prejudices, but those who judge them as other—members of the hegemonic group—do so with moral language. In thinking of groups and socialization, it is at the fringe that attempts to regulate the behavior of what is seen as a social threat meets public outrage and control becomes of primary importance, both in making and maintaining the marginal and the mainstream.

Most of us live within the extremes of morality: we claim piety and rightness as our own whereas wickedness and depravity we assign to the other, from whom we choose to distance ourselves. In most groups that live together differences are minor, yet an urge for distinction necessitates the magnification of such minor differences. The increased mobility of modernity brings into a living situation groups otherwise unlikely to associate and substitutes difference with agendas for homogeneity. Groups often thrive in separation and in some instances exist because of it—one has only to think of ethnic (Kurds) and religious (Alevi) groups that find themselves persecuted and living in separation from the majority in order to mitigate the more burdensome realities of being the other. Yet in the interdependent reality of the world where the need to live together becomes more apparent, the instinctual response of building walls to separate is one that cannot be sustained: social integration means isolation becomes less tenable, but it does not mean difference must be forced to assimilation and sameness. Attempts to eradicate and annihilate difference are invariably met with resistance. Though some government policies in Turkey—from the secularist reforms of Atatürk to ongoing efforts to assert control over the Eastern border regions—are aimed at neutralizing the spurious aspects of difference either programmatically or through ignoring the salience of minority claims, the differentiation of a higher “national” identity of Turk is *de jure* offered to all citizens but *de facto* less salient to Kurds and Alevi who want to maintain their identity.

The reality is that encountering difference can be abrasive and riddled with inherent friction; and hav-

ing to endure it can be a threat to the very nature of a national, religious, or individual-constructed identity. Bringing together a diverse group of individuals who, for example, take religion seriously, as a lived category—either as members of their particular faith communities or as self-described secularists cognizant of the foundational contributions of religious traditions to contemporary social order—creates a microcosm of the challenges of living with the other in the broader society. Being placed in a setting outside of their home community, people are often more accommodating and willing to search for common connections on which to build initial relations; this aspect of civility is usually very thin and rarely enough to build a lasting relationship. Yet the search for and attempt to highlight similarities is something that many programs advocating peace through understanding seem to support: that if we know each other well enough and see that religions (and people more generally) have an “essence” that is the same or at least shared, then we can move closer to peaceful coexistence. As people spend more time together and in settings where the foundations of their religious understanding is challenged by the fundamental differences inherent in the cosmological view of someone with whom they presumably share a similar essence, the inescapable nature of difference creates its friction. In other words, the similarities between Muslims, Christians, and Jews; Turks and Kurds; and Alevi and Sunni are not always enough to assure peaceful coexistence.

Various mediums emerge to overcome difference—such as the nation-state, where nationality is intended to create a regional unity tied to territory and modern notions of state, or economics in a global system, where encounters are narrowed to the exchange of goods rather than the thicker relations of the traditional market imbued with far-reaching social obligations—but the reality is that difference is inevitable and encountered on a regular basis. The significance of difference is evaluated in the very process of othering and the outcome is either difference being eschewed or endured. Recognizing the unavoidable nature of difference leads to an imperative requirement to find ways to live together in difference that move beyond attempts to create sameness or an essence of what can be shared. In reality, the more we know about someone’s religious or political beliefs, the more difficult it can be to call such beliefs “similar” or “similar enough”; often they are threatening. Our best hope for peaceful coexistence is to recognize that otherness permeates all aspects of relations and human interactions, and differences are best endured. ❁