

**MEETING OF TWO WORLDS**

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**THE INTERCULTURAL ASPECTS OF HELPING RELATIONSHIPS**

**MERLE, K. (ed.) (2013) Kulturwelten. Zum Problem des Fremdverstehens in der  
Seelsorge (Berlin: LIT Verlag) 344 pp., 23,5 x 16 x 2 cm, ISBN 978-3-643-11629-1, €  
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The book edited by the German theologian Kristin Merle, highlights the complicated structure of interpersonal understanding. The editor and partly author of the book, who represents the empirical renewal of pastoral theology, carefully chose her co-authors, each from a different applied field. The book revolves around the subject of interculturality and the authors makes it clear to the readers, that the meeting of two people really means the meeting of two different worlds.

In the 1970s a new question arose (CARTER 1991): what is the role of cultural values within a certain group concerning the success of a helping relationship between two people. The impact of four factors was found when studying interpersonal relationships: the values represented by the client, the values the counsellor was driven by, their assumptions of the problem, and the institutional possibilities and barriers of the helping relationship. Which means, that a counsellor living in a culturally closed, „encapsulated” environment can only understand their client if they know themselves well, their own social and cultural background, the source of their experiences, and the reasons why they belong to a group with certain values. It is important that they are aware of the patterns and stereotypes that determine their view.

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More than ten years ago Ch. Schneider-Harpprecht raised the question about the adequate way of helping someone from a different culture, religion, or with special living conditions (SCHNEIDER–HARPPRECHT 2002). According to him, a special intercultural competence is needed to achieve this. Without this intercultural competence, we cannot even fully understand the person living next to us. In order to achieve this empathic attitude, we need to handle consciously the other person's unfamiliar, different personality, characteristics, and situation. In the book we can read studies written in line with these thoughts and illustrated by case studies, stemming from the Christian belief, about the areas of person-centered pastoral counselling.

The intercultural relationship of the counsellor and the client

Interculturalism means the colourfulness and difference in views and behaviour occurring during the contact of two people representing different cultures (NIEDERMÜLLER 1999). A person coming from a foreign environment, can have difficulties in his work, in his private sphere, in his ecclesiastical and educational life, during his stay in a hospital, or concerning the environment where he lives. Given, that in their case the risk of isolation and exclusion is really high, the main aim of the studies in the book is to encourage the adequate communication of those who help them.

The listed authentic experiences urge us to improve the theory and practise of poimenics. Jesus turned to those who asked for help, seeing their beliefs, past and circumstances, in a way that his love resulted in the actual change of their conditions. In order to give assistance effectively, we need to consider the social background of the strangers as much as we can. Keeping in mind the guidance of the Old and New Testament (Ex 22:20; 23:6.9; Heb 12:22), according to which foreigners are also „fellowcitizens with the saints and of the household of God” (Eph 2:19).

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The structure and content of the book

Will the counsellor be able to see the multiple perspective in the conversation as an opportunity or will he see it as an obstacle of perfect understanding? According to the preface of the book, the hermeneutical issue of understanding strangers brought up by Gadamer (GADAMER 1960) is a constant challenge of pastoral counselling.

The book is divided into three main chapters. The *first chapter (p.15–112.)* draws up a coordinate system of spiritualism and of the philosophy of culture. In each study the authors compare two different areas of research, and the reader realises, that knowing one of them necessarily makes the other unknown. However, as K. Merle points out in the first study, a place, person or time being unknown is not its characteristic, it is just a factor showing the relationship between the two participants, and this factor is characterised by the presence of both closeness and distance. The trust or distrust felt towards the stranger determines whether one feels the other distant, inscrutable, mysterious, frightful or dangerous. When one reacts to this with behaviour, they can do it with keeping the distance, with exclusion or with hostility, and they name the barriers between them language, lifestyle or views. The degree of how much the other feels foreign determines how well we can accept and get to know the other as an individual. If the cultural traditions and values are different, understanding each other can be difficult in every level. This way, understanding another person is just a construction in our head, that can only get close to reality, but never reaches it. Communication is the only way to get closer to understanding each other, even if the true nature of the stranger is never revealed.

The study of Wilhelm Gräb deals with the difficulty of the interpretation of the concept of religion, belief and spirituality. Due to the fading meaningfulness of church language, rites and symbols, the forms of expressing beliefs become individual for everyone. But

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society cannot give up on the instruments of religion. Spirituality helps the individual to place himself in a broader context. In order to understand the other, it is essential to reconsider the religious, spiritual and sociological concepts – warns Regine Herbrich in the next study.

Gerd Sebald highlights, that during the conversion of two people who are foreign to each other, the personal space and environment determines the individual interpretations. To find the meanings, the other person's words, tone, mimics and gestures serve as a basis, but later on, the interpreter can only rely on his own schemes and explanations. In life, people permanently exchange their objective and subjective experiences and interpretations. If these interpretation patterns are somewhat similar, then it makes the interpersonal communication more useful in understanding the stranger. The immediate environment, the family, or group, or a relationship determines the reactions, the background and the sensitivity of an individual. The sphere of „us“ surrounds and influences the sphere of „me“. Jörg Metelmann analyzes this phenomenon in the study closing this chapter. In connection with a television film, *Toter Mann* dealing with a revenge fantasy, he shows the standardized patterns of emotions like revenge, punishment and reparation from the point of view of the victim. With the help of this example, he points out how the emotions generated by the media verify and make people aware of their emotions and reactions, morals and values.

The *second main chapter* (p. 115–271) deals with certain special areas of pastoral counselling. Not only deals with the temporary environments of hospital, school, prison, circus, airport and holiday resort, but also explains the special context of personal stories created by online communication, traumas and grief. The authors reflect on their own dedicated work, in the role of a participant and also an observer and try to find their own explanation to the experiences of the client.

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Tabitha Walter's exemplary study explains, that being in a hospital is a typical situation of feeling foreign, because people get to experience all levels of it. However, the counsellor's goal of reducing the suffering is not inaccessible. Through the guidance of universal symbols, we can reach that universal source of cultures and beliefs that connect all of us humans together.

Thomas H. Böhm explains the connecting force of virtual networks. Online communication offers new forms of counselling relationships, in which we need to reevaluate the scale of closeness – directness and distance – anonymity. They react even to the smallest effort, and like this we can reach those who are far from actual supporting communities, and through virtual space, we can also reach those who are dissatisfied with reality and real conditions (Lk 14:23).

„I did not reach much of what I wanted, and what I actually reached, it was not me who wanted it” says the person in focus of the next study. Maike Schult shows that state of mind, when one feels the trauma of experiencing the barriers of their personal world. When self-explanations doesn't work, values are questioned, it is especially important to place the foreign, traumatic experience into a biographic context. Pieces of literature, stories of the Bible can show some alternative for sufferers in their own personal life.

Henrik Simojoki explores the problem of hybrid identity in school environment. He wants to find interculturally competent experts to be able to help the children and teenagers, who belong to several worlds, but cannot find their place in either of them. The integration of migrants is essential to make them accept, and get them familiar with those feelings, that they feel foreign in themselves. They need to find coherent identity in spite of the fact, that they were forced to leave their home or change their religion.

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In contrast to these, the careers of comedians, showmen and street musicians depend on this state of being intermediate – as Bernard Eisel explains in his ethnography. The social-cultural background of travelling circuses is really unique. What is special about them, is the accepting of being a stranger, and not having a permanent home. It is a consciously maintained culture of this minority, with its own language, familiar structure, special rules and barriers. The microworld of these people is a great example for the more and more common phenomenon, that a group's values and views totally differ from that of the counsellors, who aim to help them.

Kerstin Söderblom, airport chaplain emphasizes respecting and living together with differences. According to her the terminal serves as a temporary area (intermediate space), where events that already happened, and events that will happen co-exist. Accompanying passengers often also require the skill of travelling between worlds, cultures, and religions, which competence can only evolve if we know our own background and past, and have broad knowledge both professionally and concerning religion.

Martin Kraus reports from a prison which is an extremely important place for pastoral consulting. The space is limited there, and we need to distinguish between the person and his actions, the actual sin and the feeling of enemy, the punishments and the chance to start again. The foreign feeling of those out of society is both objective and subjective. The journey to understand them, according to the author, is similar to a pilgrimage: it requires persistence, continuity, and the sense of purpose. It is essential to respect the stranger. The spirit of the counsellor cannot be hidden from the prisoners, it necessarily shows itself in the results he achieves, whether the insider barriers of his clients collapse or are strengthened.

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The study of Cäcilie Blume shows another special aspect of feeling like a stranger.

Funerals are supporting opportunities, when church life and personal life intersects. In the traditional liturgical frames of a church funeral, the favourite music of the deceased can appear as something out of place, if it is a folk song or a pop song. But even if the personal choice of the relatives seem strange or of different taste, the unfamiliar feeling because of the music can still be overcome. The pastor or the congregation, who knows their own musical „mother tongue” should see no threat if a strong involving personal situation asks for a different/special musical relief.

The study of Klaus Nagorni explains the existence beyond everyday life: the joy of being on the road, leaving the world of limited opportunities, finding a new reality and the happiness of transformation. The tourist who dares to leave behind their familiar environment for a while, is inspired to get to know and accept the stranger inside them.

The *third main chapter* (p.275–335) offers summarizing studies of theology, cultural anthropology and psychology, in order to understand the feeling of being a stranger.

Otmar Fuchs, as a follower of prophetic counselling points out: we can only leave our regular life at the point, when extraordinary makes its way into normality. We can only see reality, when we try something totally different. Birgit Weyel believes that psychological counselling is always intercultural. It is clear that the background and experiences of the counsellor and the client is totally different, and the personal life story determines how one sees the world. Psychological counselling means the reciprocal exchange and sharing of personal meanings. The person who requires help should always be treated as an equal partner during the conversation, who is competent to make decisions about his own life even in times of crisis. In the last study of the book Helmut Weiß emphasizes: the counselling relationship always means reflecting to different perspectives. There are different forces of language and content, body and emotions,



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historical and personal experience, partners and relationships; dynamics of different cultures and religions appear in every meeting. A competent counsellor traces these motions and makes them conscious during the dialogue, relying on the resources that the client shares with him.

The validity and relevance of intercultural approach

Being intercultural is an important aspect of religious life since Biblical times. It is the responsibility of every Christian believer. It can be found in different forms of communication, when we pray, sing or dance together, in the collective rituals of serving the Lord, in setting the special frames of catechesis, and in helping those in need. Intercultural attitude always needs and brings a broader and more differentiated world view and behaviour.

This book puts basic sociopsychological terms in new, different light, such as polarization, exclusion, generalization, preconception and stereotypes. An interculturally oriented professional is totally aware of their own values and assumptions, therefore they does not question the importance of those values found important by the other. He can deal with the problems of refusal and suppression, and by stepping out of his comfort zone, he dares to use the techniques and methods which are effective between different denominations, religions and cultures. Intercultural competence means, both in the case of an individual or a community, that the participants are able to enhance the similarities, and make them the basis of the dialogue, while they can respect and accept their differences. In the psychological practise it means that not only the client's problem, but also the setting, the „Sitz im Leben“ of the meeting has a multicultural context. The system-oriented intercultural psychology focuses on the changed situations in life, tries to find value-oriented behavioural alternatives. It examines barriers, roles, and influential positions from several angles. In order to find our connections again, we can hold on to

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simple sentences, symbols and rites. If we understand together the important events of personal life, that gives birth to new, healing narratives.

However, when we deal with the differences of cultural background that determine communication, we still should not forget about the basic principles of helping relationship, written by Carl Roger in 1954 (PATTERSON 2004). The respect towards the patient, assuming that they know their own problem best, that they are capable of progress, and also the counsellor's authenticity and skill for empathical understanding are the key factors in psychotherapy, because these work with every type of client.

Who can we recommend the book?

For a practising counsellor, this book gives an opportunity to reconsider their views, and attitudes that might have become routine. For those who are still learning, it can help in finding the way to face their own inner obstacles, schemes and generalisations. The goal is not to unite world religions or even denominations, but to preserve and maintain Christian patience and the skill to communicate (SCHWEITZER 2012). The message of this book can help in the field of social service, in pastoral counselling, and in cultural service. Intercultural thinking invisibly trickles into the reader's mind.

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