

SIPCC ONLINE SEMINAR 2021

WORKSHOP 14 JUNE

B) Social, religious, and theological aspects of superdiversity

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Pleased to be with you in this workshop, and with Boris and Michael.

I thank Boris for introducing the social aspects of superdiversity so clearly. I make some religious, psychological and theological responses.

In the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, we are taught “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” This rule comes in a section dealing with your **brother**, your **family**, your **people** - so we love our neighbour who is like ourself.

The torah tells us that rule only once. But twice it tells us “You should love the stranger as yourself” – the stranger who is different from ourself. Perhaps that is the greater commandment, or maybe it is the harder commandment to keep, and it needs to be stressed.

According to Talmud we are told at least 36 times in Torah to care for the stranger - not to wrong or oppress them, but to support them, feed them and clothe them. Caring for the other, for the alien, is at the very heart of religion.

When I began doing interfaith dialogue over 50 years ago - we looked for similarities, for what we and the other have in common.

In recent decades we have come to respect differences. The other is different, and parts of the other are not like us - they cannot be reduced to categories familiar to us. Parts of the other are not known to us, and they may be ‘unknowable’ to us. But this difference of the other need not be a cause for fear, but for endless **curiosity and celebration**

We cannot know the other completely, and psychoanalysts teach that we cannot know ourselves completely. But we can befriend and support each other, and both of us can grow through the encounter.

In a **diverse** world we are encouraged to care for the other as our self.

But that still sounds as if **we** are the self, the majority, the normal, and **they** are the ‘other’ the exotic outsider. We should be hospitable to them, but they are entering our domain, where we remain in control and set the standards, and they need to adapt and fit in.

In a **super** diverse world no group is a majority. We are all minorities. Every one of us is an ‘other.’ In London where I live, the Church of England is very significant but its members are a minority, as are Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, Jains and Bahai, we are all minorities along with a variety of secular groups - and every one of us is an ‘other’.

And if society is now made up of many others, that situation is reflected within each of us too. Every one of us is not a single unitary self, but made up of many selves - perhaps self-contradictory selves. For example, each of us has a believing self and a self who acts without reference to God. Each of us is privileged in some ways, and each of us knows discrimination.

In the “Song of Myself” Walt Whitman (1819-1892) famously wrote:

“Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)”

And later he lists his self-contradictions, for example:

“I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,
Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,
Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,” and so on.

In most fairly well-adjusted people, these internal identities get along with each other. In maladjusted people these identities are not so cohesive and can split in self-harming ways.

In a book entitled; **“My Self, My Many Selves”** Joseph Redfern, a Jungian analyst, wrote “There is a seemingly endless parade of sub-personalities within our total personality, all ready to take the stage and play their allotted roles. He said that the goal of analysis is to **“facilitate and open up interaction and intercommunication between our various selves”**.

That sounds like the mission of SIPCC, to **“facilitate and open up interaction and intercommunication between our various selves”**.

SIPCC is made up of very diverse people of different religions, cultures and disciplines, who are all working, in their own ways, to heal a fractured world. A community such as SIPCC, or any synagogue, church or university contains many diverse personalities, and this diversity can make the institution creative and dynamic but it can also cause disruption and tension and needs to be managed in a positive way.

Now a little theology – Jewish Bible commentators are comfortable with the fact that a religious text can have contradictory interpretations, and that is part of the power of scripture.

Talmud teaches that every verse of Torah has 70 faces. By this they meant that every line has a multitude of meaningful interpretations and there is no one **exclusively** correct interpretation.

The oldest commentaries teach that each person present at Sinai understood the word of God according to their capacity and experience, from babies in arms to the wisest of sages. So no one person could claim to know the totality of possible understandings.

In its thousands of pages of rabbinic discussion over six centuries, the Talmud records, and retains with respect, many diverse opinions that did not win the argument in their generation,

knowing that the time may come when those minority opinions will become most relevant for a new generation. Indeed, a new generation may discover meanings that were not imagined in previous times.

Like Moses in Midian who was a ‘stranger in a strange land’, Jews have been the ‘other’ in many places.

The Bible commands us to love the stranger as ourself. Why? You and I might say because we are all creatures of God, or perhaps that we are all created in God’s image. Those are good ideas, but they are not the reasons explicitly given by Bible. It commands us to care for the stranger because we have been strangers and because we know the heart of the stranger.

Perhaps in a superdiverse world, all of us are now as Jews in the sense that we are all strangers in some ways. We all know the heart of the stranger, and can use that experience to be good to ourselves, to each other and to our societies.