

Karl H. Federschmidt

Germany, 1997

Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling

Reflections on the background of the Intercultural Seminars in 1995 and 1996

topics:

- experiences with “intercultural pastoral care and counselling”
- methodological questions
- the hermeneutics of intercultural pastoral care
- cultural concepts of person – the individual and society
- the issue of religion in intercultural care

source: *Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling No 2, 1997; pp. 8-12*

I.

Looking back on her experience in the realm of international conferences on pastoral care, Liesel-Lotte Herkenrath-Püschel who has done a lot by way of interconnecting various international pastoral care movements writes the following: “...when members from different systems try in earnest to reach mutual understanding it is inevitable that they hurt each other's feelings...; and naturally clashes between very close systems hurt the most”. One feels so, because it is from closer systems where one would expect it the least and because the sudden experience of non-understanding and of being like strangers is most painful and irritating and particularly disconcerting. According to Herkenrath-Püschel “such offences are almost typical of intercultural dialogue and occur when the concerned suddenly become aware of a deep rift between their cultures”.¹

The above words could be taken as a commentary on the meanwhile ten “International Seminars on Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling” the last of which was held in Ustron/Poland. The above-mentioned experience seems to have been made many times and in different ways over and over again. And it was exactly this experience of feeling hurt and not understood which led us to explore deeper the cultural dimension of pastoral care and counselling and which – at least in relation to the pastoral care movement in Germany – awakened our interest in the issue of “intercultural pastoral care” as such.² This is not at all surprising. As a matter of fact, culture normally envelops us like the air we breathe but take no notice of until something disturbing happens – shortness of fresh air or sudden changes. We become aware of the existence of air for instance if there is a draft, so it causes a twinge – and the same can be said of our culture.

It is also very interesting that – at least with us – the question of culture did not emerge at first from dealing with multicultural settings in practice, but rather from “within”: from experiences of being different within our (supposedly) own and secure environment, among ourselves as women and men working in pastoral care and counselling, among ourselves who believe to have so much in common, even as far as having equal standards of training. I think this is a very important point. It makes me realise that that which is strange and of different culture need not necessarily be exotic, it may wait for me just across my own garden fence. Even in the closest area of my own tradition I have to be prepared for the different and for culturally based alienness – for difficulties in understanding and acts of offence which do not result from malevolence or an unwillingness to understand each other, but are rooted in the variations of cultural colouring which distinguish me from my neighbour.

As for the specific elements which the intercultural aspect adds to our practical work – once we have become aware of it – the first realisation simply is that once again things have become a little more complicated than expected. With encounters in the field of intercultural pastoral care still more aspects and factors have to be taken into consideration and paid attention to as having an effect on the encounter. It is no longer enough to concentrate on the encounter on a personal level, in fact, the social, political, and even spiritual backgrounds of the people gain importance;³ group processes become increasingly more complex – and in the end, there will be even more things of which I must admit that I did not understand these. So I simply carry on alongside the things I understood as well as those I did not, and try to deal with both in the most sensible manner (both as a human being and as someone engaged in pastoral care).

Again, let us listen to Liesel-Lotte Herkenrath-Püschel: “Only if we acknowledge the limitations of understanding between members of different cultures can we succeed to some extent. This also means to refrain from over-expectations on both sides”.⁴

II.

Possible forms of encountering the alien

In the last decades, the context in which pastoral care and counselling occur in Western Europe has changed considerably. Cultural diversity has become a visible aspect of our everyday life, manifest in the changed streetscape of our towns and cities. How do I meet people from different environments, different cultures, in a world that has turned multicultural? Which is the attitude to be adopted towards them?

There are many destructive forms of dealing with people. If we leave those aside and concentrate on a more positive approach, we will discover a multiplicity of other possibilities. Below, I would like to try and outline a few possible attitudes – “ideal type” ones and not by any means exhaustive:

1. A supposed world citizen

I can choose to meet the alien with a universalistic attitude, the attitude of a world citizen. In that case I accept the differences as a given fact, as something that might make an encounter more difficult at first, but – in principle – could be over-

come by increased background knowledge, through studies and more contacts. This is partly what I have experienced myself: Things which felt alien to me first grew more familiar once I got to know these better. However, if the fact that something is “alien” is basically something temporal, something that has to be overcome – then this approach results in the end in a negation of the alien within the alien. Viewed from a higher plane, there is no such thing as “being alien” at all; and if something feels alien to me, this only gives proof of my own limited horizon. I think that the conception of pastoral care within the church is still predominantly based on this universalistic ideal. Our demand reads: Closeness and understanding are always possible, in principle, and therefore have to be striven for. However, reality often draws a different picture. Even some optimistic models of a multicultural society are based on this conception: To overcome “being alien” is only a question of learning. And often this learning programme is coupled with considerable moral pretensions.

2. *The alien as a foil to set off myself*

Negating the alien: this can happen in a much more subtle way. Many of the fashionable things which come under the name “postmodern” even seem to search for what is alien or different, demonstrate and emphasise it. But this is done in such a way as to “alienate” the alien elements from their contexts. To me this seems like turning the whole world into a collage or a museum in which I can experience myself. The alien detached from its hereditary context becomes a projection area for myself, the alien is made into something exotic which stimulates me but has stopped to stir me. The corresponding pastoral-care model would be an attitude of arbitrariness which prefers to let all forms of verbal expression, all forms of religion or culture exist amicably side by side.

A variation of this can be found in the role the culturally alien played in the art of painting in the first decades of this century. Among expressionists for instance, African sculptures were *en vogue* for quite some time. Even Picasso collected such items. Gauguin went to live on Tahiti – but not with an idea to share the existence of the people there! The alien was experienced as a counter-image and was interesting because it reflected experiences of alienation, differences and rifts in one’s own society.⁵ This, I feel, is along the lines of pastoral-care models or therapy approaches which reduce the issue of “feeling alien” to the problem of the “alien within myself”. The alien which irritates me is thus reduced to an expression of the unconscious, the suppressed parts of myself. Such models of interpretation are well known from analytically-oriented psychological definitions. I should think that these explanations offer many valuable insights, but they do not suffice as a sole pattern of interpretation.

3. *Hermeneutics of the alien*

It may sound old-fashioned: But I feel that the classical approach of hermeneutics is more helpful here than all the above models. The point is to try to “understand” the alien without eliminating its being alien or different. The point is not to give in to generalisation too quickly, but to perceive my vis-à-vis in her/his singularity and within their particular context - while at the same time hoping (and to a certain extent expecting) that understanding is possible even across borders.

I am in no way concerned with the high standards of hermeneutic virtuosi who claimed that by proceeding methodically they could understand an author better than he or she could themselves. What I have in mind is to remind us that our occidental hermeneutics originates from the exegesis of the Holy Bible and there-

fore, at least in its origins, is committed to certain theological fundamentals. Exegesis must be seen as an attempt to understand a vis-à-vis which I know I will never have understood fully, which will always remain one step ahead since it confronts me with words of divine revelation unfathomable to me. As a matter of fact, hermeneutics, viewed from the point of exegesis, does not start from the assumption that 'only like knows like', as Aristotle and the classical philosophers have put it. On the contrary, confronted with a biblical text I always discover things unsuspected, new things which are nevertheless important for myself and for my conception of myself as well as for my life. Significantly enough, the founding father of the pastoral care movement, A. Boisen, developed the theory of encounter in pastoral care along the lines of an exegesis: he describes the vis-à-vis as "a living human document" which deserves to be read applying the same methods as when reading the Holy Bible. This means: Boisen must have been consciously aware of this tension existent also in pastoral care work: A successful encounter holds something divinatory, can be characterised as a kind of revelation to me - and it may happen without ever totally removing any last trace of feeling alien towards my vis-à-vis. This illustrates how my own conception of a God-human relationship determines the options I have in my relationships to other people.

What matters to me in these reflections is the following: An encounter must include both, becoming closer as well as reserving the alien. And another point: Successful understanding sets off a process and changes occur, in fact on both sides. The issue is to get involved in an encounter as a never-ending process.

III.

In concrete terms: Problematic areas in intercultural pastoral care and counselling

Is there anything like a basic "inter-cultural" attitude in pastoral care? David Augsburger whose book *Pastoral Counseling Across Cultures* (1986) is still a standard work with regard to our topic distinguishes between three different positive attitudes in an encounter: ⁶

- "Sympathy" as a spontaneous and in most cases unreflected way of feeling with the vis-à-vis, which means that I simply project my own feelings upon the other person or recognise these in her or him.
- "Empathy" (in the way this term is known from client-centred therapy and from pastoral care training): Feeling with the other person as a conscious and affective attitude towards my vis-à-vis, an emphatic understanding, as "active imagination" of her or his emotions – making a distinction between my own emotions and those of the other person.
- Thirdly: "Interpathy" which D. Augsburger understands as a form of conscious empathy, too, but making an effort to let oneself in for the emotions, standards of values and mentality of the other person all of which are different from mine so that my own beliefs will somehow be temporarily ignored and shoved to the background. What we talk about here is something more than empathy; for if I acknowledge the existence of dif-

ferent values and standards, the question arises anew of what is normal, what is the aberration? What is healthy, what is sick?

Some issues which came up during the last Intercultural Seminars may point to what is at stake here, and may show how great the differences possibly are:⁷

1. The question of our world view

Which is the world view, the cosmology I assume? Not reflecting on it philosophically or theologically, but in my everyday talking and doing? At the seminar two years ago, Robert Solomon from Singapore illustrated the great importance attached to a peculiar area of experience in his country, placed somewhere between the given and the transcendent: An "in-between sphere" which on the one hand is fully present in the everyday doing and on the other hand is not subjected to the law of nature; an area having religious aspects and at the same time being independent of concrete images of God and a particular religion and which is therefore experienced as real by many Buddhists, Muslims and Christians alike. In this sphere, spirits for instance play a big role. According to him, it is from this area where most of the questions that come up in pastoral care originate from – and those involved in pastoral care should take this seriously if they did not want to miss the people concerned. I have also come across such questions working as a pastor in pastoral care – may be this “in-between sphere” plays a much bigger role with us than we generally assume.

Looking at the question of cosmology (of a world view), we must also take into consideration that there are cultures and religions which are not theistic, i. e. do not have a personal God. This is particularly true of Buddhism. Studies about dying processes in Japan show that mourning phases are experienced there, too, similar to those described by Kübler-Ross. But the phase of “bargaining” as part of the dying process seems not to occur there.⁸ If no personal vis-à-vis exists, no God or any kind of personal fateful power, who is there to bargain with? This difference is all the more interesting in so far as we often find that (in the West) even such people who view themselves as irreligious, as agnostics, start to “quarrel with their fate” once they are confronted with severe strokes of fate – as if there did exist some sort of a vis-à-vis, however vague it might be. Obviously these are cultural characteristics which lie much deeper than any conscious profession of religion!

2. The concept of person

A different cosmology also means: a different concept of person. In certain respects, the relationship between the individual and society is of a totally different nature in other cultures. At our last seminar, Nalini Arles from India explained how difficult it was to transfer fundamental conceptions of client-centred therapy to her country. Therapeutic goals such as “strengthening of the ego” or “development of the Self” will catch only in a very limited way; the only “Self” existent in the cultural tradition of India is “jiva”, the individual soul, which incidentally happens to be regarded as something temporary, something which needs to be overcome in order to reach identification with the “atman” or world soul. Of course, cosmological axioms will not be found in a philosophically perfected form with most people there either; and still they have a very subtle bearing on the thinking and feeling of the people.

3. The individual and society

On the societal level, a difference is made between “individual-centred” and “community-centred” societies. Most of the non-Western societies are much less individual-oriented than ours. Guidance by traditions, the individual embedded in the extended family, all these play a much bigger role – with the result that the pastoral care worker or counsellor must take on a different role, too. Our Indian colleague told us that while it is common practice in the psychological therapy setting in the West to limit the establishment of a relationship to the counselling set-up, this pattern will hardly work in India. When she builds up a relationship in pastoral care, for instance to a student (she works at a Christian college), it will naturally be expected of her to accompany and encourage the student during exam times, to attend family events etc. It would be regarded as a breach of confidence if she did not do so; she would create the impression that her “acceptance” of her vis-à-vis was not really worth that much. As counsellor she is also given the role of a personal mentor – and she is expected to fill this role even to the extent of placing her client in a job. This certainly is a very holistic model of pastoral care as compared to the professionally set-up therapy (in the West). On the other hand, it is much less emancipative as regards the individual. However, the textbook model of a client-centred counsellor who develops action models together with the client and in doing so remains deliberately non-directive, leaving the part of decision-taking totally to the client – this is a model hardly conceivable in an Indian context; there, a counsellor, as the mentor, also gives advice, even to the extent of direct instructions.

In this context, many questions arise with regard to the goal which is to be achieved by pastoral care or therapy. For instance: Given a certain conflict situation, is it my aim to strengthen the individual in her/his independence as against their community (family) - or do I try to help her/him adapt themselves?

If inclusion within a group – and acceptance via the role the group assigns to an individual – plays such a dominant part, this will also bring up methodical questions. While we prefer to use role-play, even bibliodrama, in order to help the individual experience various possibilities of action, understand and live through them, this method might not have a liberating effect on people who are anyway strongly governed by the expectations towards them from their society, and might rather have a restricting effect on them.⁹

4. The issue of religion

“Interpathy” as a means of letting myself in for the standards and world view of a different culture - this will inevitably take me to the area of religiousness. Issues like cosmology or the concept of person, all these have a religious aspect, too. Drawing a clear line between culture and religion as we often do is quite impossible with regard to Asia or Africa. Even with us, there is a closer connection between the two than we like to admit. I first realised this when colleagues from Eastern Europe happened to ask me at some of our seminars: In your work, how does your faith, your religion come to the fore? – In part, I felt this was a justified question to ask. On the other hand: In the environment in which we work as pastors (or as counsellors in church institutions) we can afford to leave questions of faith unmentioned; this is to say that in our work we quietly feed on the set-up of the ambient church life and of the Christian faith. It is self-evident that a pastor belongs to the Church, this needs no particular mentioning. God's name may re-

main unmentioned, because in a certain way God is implicit in our thinking. However, the situation is quite different in many other countries.

When I meet somebody from a different culture, of a different faith – how about my own faith? How far am I prepared or able to let myself in for the other person's faith if I try to let myself in for her/his culture? I think each of us will have to find their own distinct and theologically founded positions. In intercultural pastoral care, in fact, the inter-religious issue always arises; and inter-religious dialogue – not on an abstract academic level, but embedded in the facts of everyday life - certainly is at the core of intercultural pastoral care. There are still many unsettled points with all of us in this field.

When founding our “Society for Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling”, there was a strong controversy about a certain formulation in our statutes. How important is the fact that we are rooted in a Christian tradition if we want to encourage intercultural pastoral care and counselling? Obviously, we want cooperation with people coming from other religious traditions. But how important is the fact that the majority of us administer pastoral care as Christians and that this is where our motivation comes from? If we show our own identity, this may cause friction – but it can also produce more clarity.

Two years ago, a Buddhist monk came to our seminar as a speaker. It was extremely interesting to listen to his discourse on his pastoral care work in Thailand. One evening, he offered to hold a meditation, just to give a first impression. Of course, we Western Europeans took part – where else could we learn about something like that in a more authentic way? However, the reaction of some of our Asian and African colleagues I happened to talk to was quite different. They were aware of the fact that Buddhist meditation was not just another cultural phenomenon, but quite a determined form of religious practice – a kind of religious practice which was not theirs (and as a matter of fact neither mine). Certainly, I do not wish to put up dividing lines, but I think each of us will have to find their own position here, a position which is clear and responsible in its theological consequences. For naive openness would mean that I do not take the other person seriously in just her/his separate religiousness.

5. The issue of politics

In the same way as intercultural encounters touch on the issue of religion they also lead to the issue of politics. This became quite obvious in many workshops in Us-tron. As some of the contributions from there are part of this documentation it must be enough to just mention this here. Let me only say the following: When, as it happens, traditional social structures collapse in Papua New-Guinea eventually resulting in the destruction of families as a consequence of accelerated modernisation, then there emerges a task for pastoral care which cannot be tackled on an individual level but only on a political one. And what is more, this is not a question of government politics in Papua New-Guinea only, but rather of developments in world economy.

The political dimension of pastoral care – what do we make of it?

IV.

Some strategies to reduce complexity

Realising that in intercultural pastoral care so many factors come into play and everything is so much more complex, the question arises: Are encounters and understanding at all possible? It is simply impossible to have in mind all the various aspects however relevant they may be. Fortunately, experience tells us that this is not necessary. Deep encounters across cultural barriers are possible (and have been so during our seminars). Building up a contact to another human being can succeed – and, thank God, has been doing so again and again, even though one might not have fully understood all the aspects of the other person's culture.

Cross-cultural fundamental experiences

In my everyday practice I am forced to somehow diminish intercultural complexity. Most of the time this will happen unconsciously, which is good. However, some methodical proposals can be made. Quite obviously, one can draw on fundamental human experience which is cross-cultural. I take John Foskett's considerations on "the unknown in intercultural communication", mainly his recourse to our individual birth experiences, as an important suggestion in this context.¹⁰ Experiences of one's own birth, of joy or death are essentially human in such an elementary way that it will certainly be impossible to ever "pin them down" to one single culture. Taking in a glimpse of the horrors of Oswiecim /Auschwitz was such an elementary experience which had its own effects, however complex they were. It united – and divided.

In a well-known German-language journal of the pastoral care movement, Albrecht Grözinger recently suggested to draw on human "fundamental symbols" and basic "gestures".¹¹ Among others he mentions the symbol of water to which is attributed a sense of being threatening as well as healing in many religions and cultures – even in modern literature. Can we use such fundamental symbols in a cross-cultural context?

I think we had better not be over-enthusiastic in this regard. I would like to recall the unexpected effect the uniting symbol of "soil from the Holy Land" had on one of the participants during the closing service at a former seminar. A woman, wife of a pastor, whose ancestors came from the Caribbean left the service crying. Later she explained: "In the Caribbean, if we get involved with soil, we get involved with the evil – if someone puts soil into our hand, the evil is present".¹²

With regard to basic gestures – as for instance the gesture of blessing – the situation may not be any different. How much physical closeness or distance does the other person need or can she/he take without feeling embarrassed? That is very different from one culture to the next. Our body language, mostly uncontrolled by ourselves, is strongly influenced by our culture. Does it make any difference which of my two hands I use to welcome an African? Yes, it does – there have been interesting encounters at seminars also in this respect!

Tolerance

We have to admit that it is impossible to fully avoid offence to occur in intercultural encounters. To see this matter-of-factly can also be a relief. We need to practise enduring such acts of offence, which means: practise tolerance (*tolerare* in

Latin means to stand or endure something). Hence, two things are needed to make intercultural encounter a success: On the one hand, to practise tolerance with regard to others and to ourselves; and on the other of course, to find ways to keep these offences small.

With regard to the latter, I have learned to appreciate anew the importance of social manners through our intercultural seminars. Among those engaged in pastoral care, frankness and directness during arguments as well as a preparedness to quarrel are considered high objectives in dealing with one another. The way Germans or Britons for instance tended to act out their individual tensions or frustrations during intercultural seminars was very impressive. It used to leave Asians, Africans, and even Eastern Europeans perplexed: "Is this the way you treat each other?" they asked.

In Chinese culture, in all my dealings with other people, I must be very careful not to let the other person lose face. Save my face, allow the other person to save face – in dealing with one another this is very important. In Ustron, a colleague from Ghana said: In a conflict situation, we would always put the interest of the group above our personal interest. None of the two are ideals I should like to follow. But what I found worth thinking about was the sensitivity of my colleague from Ghana when he commented on social manners in his tradition, as for instance the different meanings given to one's right or left hand, respect of old age and similar things (matters which, as far as I could see, were immediately understood and acknowledged by the people present from Asia) – and above all the complexity of his sensitivity in these issues. And I realised: Social manners are not always mere symbols of social repression. They are also a high cultural good – and a great help when dealing with anything alien.

Notes

- ¹ L.-L. Herkenrath-Püschel: Kulturelle Faktoren im seelsorgerlichen Dialog, in: *Wege zum Menschen* 40 (1988) p. 50-64 (quotation p. 54).
- ² Cf. H. Weiß. / K. Temme: Reviewing the journey. The 'Intercultural Seminars' 1986 to 1995, in: *Human Images and Life-Stories in a Multicultural World*, ed. by U. Atkins / K. Federsmidt, Düsseldorf 1996, p. 6-12 (reprinted in this workbook, p. 17).
- ³ In our seminars, we tried to dispose the relevant aspects under tree headlines, which then formed a kind of "circle" to be worked through when analysing a situation of intercultural pastoral care and counselling:
 - Interpersonal Communication: biographical situation, biographical processes, emotional links, roles, etc.
 - Personal Context: historic conditions, economic factors, social and political conditions, cultural values, etc.
 - Experiences of Faith: religious symbols, religious and church traditions, life schemes and faith statements, religious and spiritual forces, etc.
- ⁴ L. Herkenrath-Püschel, *op. cit.* p. 56.
- ⁵ Cf. Th. Sundermeier, *Den Fremden verstehen. Eine praktische Hermeneutik*, Göttingen 1996, p. 40-42.
- ⁶ David W. Augsburger: *Pastoral Counseling Across Cultures*, Philadelphia 1986. For the following cf. p. 27-32.
- ⁷ For some of the following examples cf. *Human Images and Life-Stories in a Multicultural World* (op. cit.), there especially: R. Solomon: Pastoral counselling in Asian contexts (p. 22-25) and N. Arles: Counselling in the Indian context (p. 26-28) (both articles are reprinted in this workbook: Arles p. 111; Solomon p. 239)
- ⁸ Cf. D. Augsburger (op. cit.), p. 66.

Part 2, Chapter A : The meaning of intercultural pastoral care and counselling

⁹ Cf. L. Herkenrath-Püschel (*op. cit.*), p. 61.

¹⁰ J. Foskett, The 'Unknown' in Intercultural Communication, in: *Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling*, No. 2, p. 13-15.

¹¹ A. Grözinger, Seelsorge im multikulturellen Krankenhaus, in: *Wege zum Menschen* 47 (1995), p. 389-400.

¹² Quoted from: H. Weiß / K. Temme (*op. cit.*), p. 10.