

**Lehigh County Conference of Churches**  
**Robert K. Campbell Lectures on Christian Unity**

Lecture #2: Christian Unity and the Challenge of Single Identity Politics

Ian T. Douglas

Introduction

We left off this afternoon with a consideration of how our different identities can draw us closer to God and a fuller participation in God's mission; or how our different identities sometime alienate us from God and each other. Before considering the possibilities for solidarities across the differences that exist between individuals and groups, particularly in our ecumenical relations, I think it is worthwhile to look at what it is that most impedes mutuality and interdependence in the *missio Dei*.

Given the multiple identity variables involved for any individual or group in the non-target/target power dynamic combined with the multiple levels in which power is exercised (discussed in Lecture #1), it is difficult to see how a dualistic either/or presentation of identity politics can be sustained. And yet we do it all the time. How often do we focus on one or another aspect of our lives in order to find security in the seemingly known and familiar? In our lives as Christians, how often do we turn our backs on the Lund Principle, ("that we should not do separately what conscience permits us to do together" – WCC Lund 1952) preferring instead to work within our own traditions and theological ghettos. Not that there is any great security even within the confines of our own specific tradition. For example, in my own particular tradition as Anglicans we seem to be at a crisis point in the Anglican Communion where the divisions over human sexuality are so pronounced that they threaten the very existence of the Communion as a family of churches. In order to perpetrate these battles over human sexuality, the many identities at the multiple levels that any individual or group inhabits must be diminished to a single identity politic.

The Trap of Single Identity Politics:

Let us begin with a consideration of the relational dynamics that prohibits the building of solidarities across differences, and thus limits our participation in the *missio Dei*. And here I want us to look at the trap of single identity politics.

A single identity politic, by definition, elevates one identity variable to a place of predominance and exclusivity while significantly under-appreciating, or even denying, the other identities inhabited by a person or group. When one identity variable is focused on it is very easy to construct a dualistic either/or scenario that pits one side against another. With two sides clearly determined and articulated along the one identity variable, it is then easy to demonize or vilify the other as different or less deserving of full respect or dignity. Objectifying the other as different and less than can then become a precursor to perpetrating violence and even warfare. Returning to Amartya Sen, he sees single identity politics, or the “illusion of singular identity” or “unique identity” as the root cause of violence. Sen says:

To see a person exclusively in terms of only one of his or her many identities is, of course, a deeply crude intellectual move . . . and yet, judging from its effectiveness, the cultivated delusion of singularity is evidently easy enough to champion and promote. The advocacy of a unique identity for a violent purpose takes the form of separating out one identity group – directly linked to the violent purpose at hand – for special focus, and it proceeds from there to eclipse the relevance of other associations and affiliations through selective emphasis and incitement.<sup>1</sup>

While Sen is writing out of the conflicted multi-religious context of South Asia, those of us who call ourselves Christians are not immune from his analysis. Speaking once again from my own tradition, the violence of singularity might well describe current tensions in the Anglican Communion over human sexuality. Those who reduce the complex and plural realities of the Anglican Communion today to the single identity

---

<sup>1</sup> Sen, 175.

politic of human sexuality are then in a place to characterize the other with such violent words as “homophobic” or “less than human” depending on where one stands with respect to the place of gay and lesbian people in the church. Such hurtful and violent characterizations do not build up the Body of Christ.

So how do we get beyond the trap of single identity politics, and its specter of violence? Returning to the work of Valerie Batts and the multiple identity variables she emphasizes in her process of multicultural change, it is useful to reemphasize that every human and every social group embodies many different identities. The more that we can live in the multiple identities and the simultaneity of both our non-target and target variables in our personal, inter-personal, institutional, and cultural transactions, the more free we will be from the trap of singularity. This calls for an awareness of, an appreciation of, and ownership of both our own non-target and target identities as well as the non-target and target identities of the other. Embracing the multiple non-target and target identities that I and the other inhabit is a first step in overcoming the confines and violent possibilities of single identity politics.

It is important at this juncture of articulating our multiple identity variables that we neither rank the variables nor compete with the other about who has more non-target or target variables. Such ranking or competition is simply another more subtle form of single identity politics that fundamentally denies the multiplicity of identities any person or group inhabits. The key point is that each person or group fundamentally inhabits both non-target and target identities, and that they are able identify and articulate what these identities are for themselves. So let us try on another exercise at this point:

Second Exercise: in one on one conversations,

(same pairs as the opening exercise if possible, 2-3 minutes each person on each question)

- 1) Identify and discuss one area of your life/identity where you are or have been privileged by your non-target status.
- 2) Identify and discuss one area of your life/identity where you are or have been oppressed or marginalized because of your target status.

(briefly unpack exercise with a few offerings by individuals who feel free to share)

### Finding Our Way Out of the Trap

While appreciating differences and multiple identities for myself and for the other can be a cognitive exercise that calls for mindfulness and awareness (what we just did in the exercise), a second and possibly more important step is necessary if we are to move to a place of genuine appreciation and reconciliation with those who are different and thus live in the fullness of God's mission. This step requires us to be in touch with how we feel about the many different identities we inhabit.<sup>2</sup> What does it feel like to be a target of oppressive structures? How do we process the pain and hurt that we experience when disempowered or abused? Conversely, and this is sometimes more difficult than identifying the feelings associated with our target identities, what does it feel like to have power and privilege? Can we identify the feelings associate with being non-target?

Once we are able to identify our feelings associated with our non-target and target identities, we are then able to connect affectively with those who inhabit different non-target and target identities than us. Specific non-target and target variables will obviously be different from individual to individual, or group to group. But the assertion here is

---

<sup>2</sup> The power of feelings in building solidarities and understanding across differences is emphasized in the process of multicultural changes as developed by Dr. Valerie Batts.

that the feelings associated with each non-target and target status will be strikingly similar. We are thus challenged to share what it feels like to be privileged and oppressed, non-target and target, even if the variables are different. In the sharing of the commonality of these feelings across the various variables we inhabit is the possibility of building solidarities across differences. Like Jesus who wept at Lazarus's tomb and yet drew on his power to raise his friend, we Christians are called to be in touch with our feelings of hurt and pain and our power and possibility if we are to serve the fullness of God's mission in the world.

Perhaps it is helpful to return to the example of the American Episcopalian lay-woman and the African Anglican bishop to see how the awareness and appreciation of multiple identity variables and the affective sharing of common emotions related to these variables can build understanding and solidarity across differences. Imagine if the American lay-woman could share with the African bishop what it feels like to have power as a Western English speaking person, or one who is economically secure, or who is white, or one who holds a United States passport. And imagine if the bishop could share what it feels like to have power as a man, or one who is married, or one who is a bishop in a growing and vital church. Similarly imagine if the American lay-woman could share what it feels like to be disempowered as a woman, or as a lesbian, or as lay-person; and if the African bishop could identify what it feels like to be targeted as an historically colonized African, or a person who lives in an economically dire conditions, or for whom English is not a first language in inter-Anglican meetings where English is the prime language of discourse. While these two Christian leaders experience different sources of power and oppression based upon the different non-target and target identities they inhabit, the feelings associated with being privileged and disempowered are very similar. Sharing their feelings of power and privilege, or oppression and disempowerment allows for the finding of commonality and solidarity as a sister and brother in Christ while not denying the profound differences each person inhabits.

Clearly if the American lay-woman and the African bishop are to discover their commonalities in their differences then there needs to be a theological, or even a missiological rationale, for being vulnerable and open to one another. Key to this open and trusting exchange is the willingness to listen to the other, and the desire to see the face of Christ in the other. In meeting Christ anew in the other, through a listening process where individuals and groups can share the possibilities and pain of their non-target and target identities, is the promise of restoration and reconciliation at the center of God's mission. So let's try on this kind of sacred listening across differences we inhabit in our ecumenical lives together.

Third Exercise, in one on one conversations:

(same pairs as the other two exercises, 5 minutes each person)

- 1) In your ecumenical relationships, when is it that you are, or have been privileged because of your non-target status/identity? And When is it that you are, or have been, marginalized because of your target status?
- 2) How might your feelings related to these different ecumenical identities engender solidarities across differences?

(debrief by open discussion)

### The Missiological Significance of Conversations across Differences

We began this afternoon with a brief review of Holy Scripture as offering a meta-narrative on the nature of God's mission. The operative missiological assertion of the Biblical overview was that difference is of God and basic to the goodness of God's creation. I further posited that God's mission in Jesus Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit is to restore all people and all creation to unity with God and each other in Christ;

to reconcile an alienated and dived world wracked by sin to a wholeness and oneness intended by God in creation.

We then spent some time considering how the differences and tensions that exist between individuals and groups can be manifested in a variety of identity variables at multiple levels: personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural. We looked at how the trap of single identity politics threatens the possibilities of a reconciled creation. A model of discovering commonalities in the midst of differences in identities was offered. Basic to this model was an appreciation of the fact that any individual or group inhabits many different identities some of which offer privilege and power and some of which engender oppression and marginalization. It was suggested that in the eyes of God all of our many differences can be bridged in solidarities across differences as we share how it feels to be both a non-target and target in our personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural interactions.

So what does all of this discussion of mission and identities have to say about our ecumenical lives together as we meet to have conversations with each other in settings such as these Campbell lectures? First, listening to one another and listing to God is fundamentally an exercise in faithfulness to the mission of God. If the Bible calls us to follow in the footsteps of a God who seeks to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ, then listening to and talking with the other in the promise of restoring unity in a divided world is profoundly missiological in nature. The missiological significance of conversation is that in listening to and talking with one another across differences we are participating in the hope of a restored and reconciled world intended by God.

Listening across differences is incredibly difficult in a sinful world torn apart by single identity politics. We Christians believe, however, that in Christ God is reconciling the world to himself. In Jesus the seemingly irreconcilable identities of one who is fully human and fully God have been brought together in a reconciled reality for the redemption of the world. As the Body of Christ today, the Church, all of us in all our ecumenical differences are thus called to live in the same fundamental reality that our differences need not alienate us one from another but instead can help us to better serve the fullness of what God is up to in the world. The great Anglican missiologist Max Warren is credited with saying: “It takes the whole world to know the whole Gospel.” The corollary, I think, is also true: “It takes the whole Church, in all of our differences, to serve the fullness of God’s mission in the world.”

Our profound differences are, indeed, already reconciled in Jesus, and unity with God and each other in Christ is assured. So, coming together across our differences in the unity of the Body of Christ models for the world the promise of a restored and reconciled creation. Coming together across our differences is a witness to the world that the Trinitarian God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit has effected restoration and reconciliation for all people and for all creation. Coming together across our differences is participation in God’s mission. Thank you.