

# Us and Them or Us and You?

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A while ago, the Swedish Minister for Civil Defence Carl-Oskar Bohlin said that we must talk more about "us and them". In my opinion, that is an outrageous statement in a time when our society increasingly is divided and polarised in precisely "us and them" terms.

So what should we do to counteract this dangerous trend? It would be easy to say that no, there should only be a big We. But that might be too simplistic. My friend imam Mohammad Muslim Eneborg once said that instead of talking about us and them we should talk about us and you – because there *are* differences, but we need to be in relation with "the Other", those who is different from ourselves.

I chose this same title, "Us and them or us and you" for a talk I gave in my home parish, and when it was advertised on Facebook someone commented that no, we should only talk about an inclusive Us that embraces everyone. So acknowledging difference and otherness can be controversial. Sameness or similarity can be seen as a prerequisite for communion, for a common "we".

In the Netherlands, Dr Manuela Kalsky has initiated the project "Nieuw Wij" (New We ), realising the need to work on how a people that consists of many different religious and cultural communities can form a new "we" in other ways than assimilation aiming at sameness. It will not happen automatically, but needs thoughtful effort.

When I worked at the Center for interfaith dialogue, I would sometimes get an invitation to come and talk about "similarities and differences between religions". I don't think that is a very fruitful approach, to look for similarities and differences. Comparison is generally not a good thing. It is so easy to arrive at comparing the best in your own religion with the worst in the others, as bishop Krister Stendahl warned about in his Three rules for interreligious dialogue.

Behind the request to talk about similarities and differences I also detect an assumption that similarities are good and differences are bad – that we can rejoice in the things we have in

common but be wary about the things where we differ. A common approach to interreligious relations is to say that we should look for commonalities and ignore the differences. That might be a good thing to start with, but maybe it is the differences that can challenge and enrich us. Krister Stendahl also suggested that we practice "holy envy" when we find good things in other traditions that we lack in our own.

That said, I notice that the more I engage with people of other faiths I tend to see the similarities and the things we share – even though theoretically I push for engaging with difference. So - the more you think about similarity and difference, the more complicated it gets. Not least because each tradition is so diverse in itself. For example Christian and Muslim feminists might have more in common with each other than with misogynistic pundits in any of the traditions.

A good way to deal with the question of similarities and differences is to explore the relation between universality and particularity. A recent dissertation at Åbo Akademi by Jenny Karlsson, *Solidariska i synden. En studie om synd, partikulär identitet och universell mänsklighet* – which is a good read for those of you who read Swedish – makes use of the categories of particularity and universality to explore sin in a feminist perspective. I will draw on her terminology, because I think it is very useful also when it comes to interreligious relations.

The starting point is that universalities can be harmful, they can be toxic. If you assume that your own experiences and worldview are universal, that excludes people who don't share those experiences. Then you have created a false "Us". The alleged universality is really only the particularity of the dominant group. This is something that has been pointed out by feminist and postcolonial theorists, who have privileged particular, situated experiences and the worldviews that arise from those experiences. But on the other hand, particularities can also be toxic, if you claim that one can never understand or empathise with experiences of a group you don't belong to, for example if you say that as a white person you cannot understand racism. That is a variant of the us-them dicotomy.

But if we want to reach an us-you relation there must be some kind of universality. And there are non-toxic universalities that are not in opposition to particular differences. We can talk about a factual universality: we are all finite, biological beings, part of an ecological and

historical system where we are unavoidably dependent on each other. Theologically, we can base universality on the idea that all human beings are created in the image of God, *Imago Dei*.

But then again, unavoidably, we will feel closer to one group of people whose experiences and worldview we share, and more distant, maybe even antagonistic, towards others. This doesn't mean, however, that we cannot relate to and empathise with them. There is a difference between understanding and acknowledging: you can acknowledge the suffering – or the joys for that matter – of another person even if you don't fully understand it. A toxic universality is characterised by an insensitivity or arrogance towards experiences that don't align with one's own.

We can also talk about an ethical universality, that inspires us to try to implement the idea that we belong together, and the vision of a world free from injustice, violence and oppression where we treat each other as *Imago Dei*.

So where is the significance of this for interreligious relations? I think it is very important to keep universality and particularity in a creative tension. There is a form of particularity espoused by postliberal theology that sees each religious tradition as a closed universe that can only be understood within its own parameters, and thus makes meaningful communication between Christians and non-Christians impossible. That is a toxic particularity.

However, toxic universalities might be a more serious problem for interreligious relations, as they tend to collapse differences into the sameness of the dominant tradition. A couple of weeks ago, three prominent Christian Democrats published an article in *Dagens Nyheter*, the biggest daily newspaper in Sweden, where they warned about the dangers of the Muslim Brotherhood in Europe and Sweden specifically. In the beginning of the article they state that an "adjusted islam" (*anpassad islam*) posed no problem for Swedish society. They did not find it necessary to explain what they meant with adjusted islam, but let me guess: An Islam that is stripped of all its own particularities, so that it aligns with the dominant religious tradition in Sweden, Protestant Christianity.

There is, by the way, a concept called the protestantisation of religion. According to the SAGE Encyclopedia of the Sociology of religion, this "refers to a dynamic by which various world

religions, since the 18th century, in the course of their modernization process, have been reshaped according to a Protestant model. It is about appropriating the Protestant ethos. Symbolically, it speaks of subjectivity, and of a drive for the self-empowerment of individuals.” Or, in other words, the particularity of Protestantism is understood as a universality for religion at large.

One expression of the protestantisation of religion is that holy scripture has become more important than it used to be in religions like Buddhism and Hinduism, and even paganism, that are not primarily based upon holy books. Scriptural reasoning is a dialogue method that comes från the Jewish-Christian context, eventually engaging Muslims. When members of other religious communities are invited to participate they are not on home ground so to speak. That is not to say that they cannot be engaged in Scriptural Reasoning, but we should be aware that their scriptures play a different role than ours.

In Jewish-Christian dialogue even benign attempts to find commonality can turn out to be toxic. When we apply the Lutheran understanding of ”the Law” to the Jewish concept of Torah and the Muslim Sharia, we are making a universalist error, as they are not the same.

When we talk about the ”Judaeo-Christian tradition, Christians tend to assume that the prophetic tradition is central to Judaism – but even if there are readings from the Prophets in the Synagogue, it is the Torah, the five books of Moses that is the core of the service and the understanding of what Judaism is about. We are trying to make a Christian particularity, where we see Isaiah and the Psalms as the core of the Hebrew Scriptures, universal, but that is a fake universality. Instead we should acknowledge the particularity of the Torah to the Jewish community. And maybe, if we make the effort to understand it, we might arrive at holy envy.

So where does this take us? We should respect the particularity of different faith traditions – and, maybe even more so, all the particularities within each of them: spiritual traditions, ethnic and cultural particularities, conservative, liberal and progressive interpretations etc etc. But we could also be convinced that these particularities can engage with each other. We can rest in the conviction that we belong together as inhabitants of Earth, created in the image of God, sharing the need to come together to make the earth a place where we strive

for "justice, peace and the integrity of creation" as the old World Council of Churches' slogan goes.

By saying "us and you" we affirm that relation is at the heart of being in the world: the relation to God, neighbour, nature and ourselves, and that we commit ourselves to reaching out a hand to the other.