Beyond Borders: Diversity as Moral and Spiritual Resource

In her foreword to Intersecting Voices: Critical Theologies in a Land of Diversity, Mary Jo Leddy states that "one of the new criteria for measuring the authenticity of any theology is whether it has the capacity to intersect with other perspectives and realities." How are we able to respond faithfully to the fact of diversity – to "the condition in which elements, including persons, differing from one another are manifested in the same region/space/organization/institution?" Learning to live in right relationship with God, self, others, and creation requires careful attention and compassionate practice to engage rather than to contain diversity. I am interested in ways to navigate the moral multiplicity that arises in the jumble and beauty of diversity in social and spiritual ecologies. I situate my discussion initially in two contrasting narratives of diversity in Canada. Then I explore how an ethics of diversity can encourage crossing borders of injustice. I concur with those who focus on both diversity and its complexity as necessary features of an ethics where justice-love is central to moral imagination. I conclude by examining hospitality to strangers and neighbours as a religious practice that generates moral energy for resistance to domination; in this practice, hope is rekindled in the midst of complex diversity.

Diversity challenges who we are and where we stand; it can be either harmful or a means of grace and growth. Shawn Copeland tells us that spirituality is not a spectator sport:

Our spirituality is our capacity to relate to God, to other human beings and to the natural world. Through these relationships, we give meaning to our experience and attune our hearts and minds to the deepest dimensions of reality. Thus spirituality is integral to ways in which we live our lives. It is about the kinds of persons we are and the kinds of persons we hope to become.... What is most necessary in our lives? For what are we living? What does it mean to be a human person?

These questions about virtues, values, responsibilities, and vision have multiple responses. Multiplicity, however, does not mean lack of moral norms or purpose in life. To be human is about loving and being loved. We must recognize and respect our finitude; we must face our capacity to help or harm ourselves and others. We must also engage diversity in the midst of the radical human freedom to treat each other well or to treat each other badly. In this struggle to embrace the gift of life, "the central expectation – and single standard for relationships," Marvin Ellison declares, "should be justice-love, understood as mutual respect and care and a fair sharing of power." Justice-love is a moral vision that calls us into being, sustains us, and invites us to act with dignity and joy.

However, insecurity and fear, uncertainty and anxiety, poverty and suffering, characterize the lives of people in many regions of the world. Acknowledging these psycho-social conditions and the ambiguity of di-
versity, we need an ethics that allows us to negotiate our engagement with diversity. With the help of more complex understandings of structural oppression, this ethics must first reframe the dominant notion of diversity that masks or distorts its complicity in sources of suffering. Second, this ethics will name and cross barriers of injustice. There are many borders or boundaries that can function as rich resources of identity and belonging or as divisions that damage and maim – boundaries of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and nation. In a diverse world we need “boundary practices” of imagination and action that do not exclude but welcome and value the gifts of those inside and beyond borders.

“Selling Diversity” and “Complex Diversity”

Diversity discourses spin multiple tales of virtues, values, responsibilities, and visions of the good life. In Canada, there are reigning and alternative moral economies of diversity. The dominant model is “selling diversity,” where official multiculturalism policy is used to make diversity a commodity for business and government interests. Moreover, when multiculturalism leaves whiteness unmarked it functions to protect the majority culture’s power to control; all others are “included” but peripheral to this group. The alternative model, which I refer to as critical or complex diversity, is rooted not in an exclusion-inclusion ethic but rather in overlapping and interactive complex differences. Here diversity is not a flattened array of colour and culture; it is created by differences within and among persons who are deeply shaped by historical processes that define social relations of power along axes of race, gender, class, sexuality, and religion. Each model of diversity has implications for identity and community as well as public well-being and belonging. Each model offers a moral economy of diversity, that is, notions of what and who counts, who we are and why we are of value, what we should be about, and what sort of world we should yearn and risk living for.

In 1971, Pierre Elliot Trudeau changed Canadian federal government policy from assimilation to multiculturalism. This national policy accepted cultural and ethnic diversity as legitimate and integral to Canadian society; the equality of Canadians of all origins was enshrined in the 1982 Constitution Act, especially its Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the 1988 Canadian Multiculturalism Act. While immigration policy is the source of Canada’s increasing ethno-cultural and racial diversity, multicultural policy addresses the value of this diversity for the Canadian nation. More recently, the neo-liberal emphasis on “managing diversity” to serve as a competitive lever for Canada in world markets has challenged the hope that the official multiculturalism of Trudeau’s “just society” could promote a more equitable Canada.

Yasmeen Abu-Laban and Christina Gabriel have examined how diversity is playing out under conditions of neo-liberalism. In 1986 diversity was initially embraced in terms of the slogan “multiculturalism means business.” This policy focus since the 1990s has emphasized hiring “visible minorities” to capture markets at home and abroad and to acquire cheap labour. The policy assumes that free markets are efficient allocators of goods and services. Consequently, among the values extolled by neo-liberal ideals are “competitiveness, efficiency, unfettered choice, profitable outcomes, and consumerism.” Himanni Bannerji has argued that diversity in Canada is not a neutral concept. By concentrating on ethno-cultural diversity as its main expression, the term diversity has diverted attention away from injustice issues in areas of job discrimination, and maintained racialized structures through a hierarchy of colour (as women of colour with gradations from pale brown and yellow to dark/black).

This is what Bannerji calls “sexist racism.” She advocates a complex diversity and stresses the need for alliances across differences that connect struggles against oppression arising out of lived experience. Those of us who are committed to intersecting with other perspectives and realities need an epistemology beyond borders; we need the generation of knowledge beyond rigidly differentiated material and spiritual categories. As Mary McClintock Fulkerson asserts, complex diversities challenge us to overcome the societal conditioning that would have us ignore our differences or treat them with suspicion or contempt, arrogance or conceit. Difference instigates a new pedagogy by which to educate ourselves critically about ourselves, about “other” and different women (and men), about our interrelations in situations of domination and oppression. Particular practices sustain our ability to live without fear, to be well, and to take courage together amidst diversity. We will appropriate radical religious traditions, be aware of our voices and those marked and excluded by discourses that “manage” diversity, develop moral imagination, and embody openness to multiple meanings in seeking justice-love.
Engaging Diversity across the Border of Race/Ethnicity

As an alternative to reigning neo-liberal notions of diversity, let us imagine “complex diversity.” This notion recognizes that we do not speak in one voice, that injustices exclude and oppress groups of people, and that we are all implicated whether we want to be or not – even if we mean no harm. Janet Jakobsen assesses diversity as the ongoing production “of differentiation that creates social categories which form the matrix of social life into which each individual is born and within which each lives.”

For example, recent demographics for the city of Toronto where I live estimate that by the year 2017 people who are “visible minorities” will comprise more than half of the city’s population (and one-fifth of the nation). According to one report, “we’ve had plenty of practice stitching newcomers into the national fabric.” On the surface this statement is descriptive or benignly inclusive. But can we assume that there is one fabric that “newcomers” must be made part of? Or is diversity a process of negotiation and contestation as well as of weaving together various threads to create a new fabric and pattern altogether? The newspaper statement just cited conceals the fact that, unless we are aboriginal, we are all immigrants to Canada, which was constructed as a white settler colony. It discourages the interrogation of whiteness as a construed identity and obscures the class basis of social relations. For example, I am a fourth generation Canadian or First World woman of Irish, Scottish, and English Protestant ancestry; I am privileged as a white, well-educated person with a secure income who is married to a supportive spouse. I do know what it means, however, to be objectified and demeaned because I am female. In what ways is this personal positioning implicated in wider social and spiritual processes that connect, marginalize, and exclude? Locating ourselves encourages us to imagine how we are each related in particular ways to and within the global and local moral economies of diversity. Unless whites have a sense of their own identities as located in specific cultures with historical narratives, whiteness remains the unmarked norm against which Otherness is defined and eurocentrism is validated. Therefore, recognizing how our own complex multiple identities are produced in relation to others amidst many communities and their social histories is essential to the work of criss-crossing borders, for instance, of official multiculturalisms when they function as cultural imperialism. Knowing where and how we are located influences the choices we can make. Getting outside of my taken-for-granted worldview helps me see the complex forces at work that have profoundly shaped individual choices and that both bring us together and keep us apart.

As Jakobsen elaborates, “This world is marked by diversity and complexity – diversity created by differences within and among persons and a collective complexity created by multiple criss-crossing power relations and resulting contradictions.” Imagination and moral energy emerge from acting on commitments to do something rather than nothing in the midst of uncertainties and contradictions spawned by diversity that is complex. Injustice or oppression describes the structural and historical shape of social relations. Iris Marion Young has helpfully drawn and analyzed five faces of oppression: exploitation, powerlessness, marginalization, cultural imperialism, and violence.

Being able to identify these relations of domination and subordination requires various theoretical insights, to understand, for example, how racialized class formation has been central to current conceptions and practices of citizenship and culture and how racism is also sexist.

How is it possible to deal differently with the complex particulars of one particular oppressive barrier to creating community and being fully human – that of race/ethnicity? Nancy Ramsay speaks of the distorting effect of inadequate definitions as one difficulty in confronting racism:

many [whites] seem to hold operative definitions that describe racism as a system of disadvantage based on race. This definition assures concern for confronting racism only as someone else’s problem.... A more adequate definition of racism describes racism as an interlocking system of advantage and disadvantage. By including the fact of racial privilege or advantage in the definition of racism, whites have to confront [their] often unwitting complicity in racism by failing to resist or confront practices and assumptions that reproduce it.

Like any oppression, white supremacy or racism affects all of us, whether it is because we are victims of various unjust power relations or because we are reaping the benefits of white advantage. Because white Europeans in Canada have come to spatially, politically, and culturally dominate through colonialism, some citizens are raised with social, economic, and cultural
privileges on the basis of assumed membership in a grouping named “white.” This membership translates into what is called white privilege, unearned entitlement or certain kinds of “presumed innocence.” This process of self-critical locating and learning to think about how our multiple identities are produced in terms of complex diversity is particularly hard for most white people. Grace often arrives through invitations to solidarity.

In the process of creating relational diversity, we practise moral discernment in struggles against oppression (like white racism) by learning to connect ourselves as individuals and as part of groups with historical and communal identities. For example, white people can imagine and do the moral work of becoming allies as a practice of co-operative power. Janet Jakobsen writes:

Diversity and complexity in women’s moral voices implies a need to develop solidarity among women across difference. Solidarity does not imply an identity of moral voices, for example between white women and Aboriginal or African [Canadian] women, but a recognition of the relationship among moral voices.16

This work seeks justice/love where struggle may be the name of hope for some and hope may be a place of creative dwelling for others.17

Practising Hospitality: Sustenance for Complex Diversity

Let us return to Mary Jo Leddy’s norm for a valid religious theory and practice: how does engaging diversity as complex and relational enlarge our capacity to intersect with other perspectives and realities? Sharon Welch’s notion of “an alchemy of desire” is a way to imagine the nature of the practice of an improvisational ethic of diversity without hegemonic borders: “Our desire is in the present in its abundance and wonder, our desire for justice a way of honouring the integrity of that which is, our political work an exuberant ‘virtuosity in the face of adversity.’”18 A practice is an ongoing, shared activity of a community of people that partly defines and partly constitutes them. A spirituality of desire, like engaging complex diversity, is expressed through many practices. “Christian practices are things Christian people do together over time in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world.”19 Imagining diversity as resource inspires religious communities to define their practices in relationship to their wider setting, to live in a web of connections with a new vision of becoming “households of life.” Then relationships with local, regional, national, and global movements of solidarity for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation become necessary, not optional, for moral energy and responsible living which come from a vision of God’s realm that is contradicted by existing social arrangements of domination and subordination. If church means “grace-enabled moral community,” parishes and congregations that know themselves to be part of this wider ecology and cosmopolitan nation could hardly be content with privatized, limited understandings of faith. They will seek instead to practise what Douglas John Hall calls “hospitality to difference.”20

Hospitality, philoxenia, is a practice that can subvert xenophobia, the hatred of strangers. “Unlike xenophobia...hospitality is a welcoming of strangers out of a delight in the possibility that in that opening of community God might be present.”21 In biblical terms, hospitality is a metaphor of compassion to practise justice and care for those who are other and for those who are in need (Luke 10: 25-37). For Lucinda Huffaker, hospitality becomes a metaphor for empathetic attunement where creating a receptive space anticipates mutual sharing and transformation.22 Hospitality is a style of interaction that creates a climate of openness to difference. Hospitality creates a safe and welcoming space for persons to find their own sense of humanity and worth. In short, hospitality to the other is not the vocation of helping or liberating the oppressed other; it is the work we do to liberate ourselves in relation to the oppressed other.23

Conclusion

Relational responsibility in a world of diversity is a process of learning to engage multiple differences. Complex diversity can be a matrix of possibility that releases moral energy for justice/love. Injustices constructed by dominant approaches to diversity constitute borders of material and political differences that interact in complex ways. Alternatively, the notion of complex diversity is a theoretical, moral, and spiritual resource to learn about the ways we can be moral agents who acknowledge our finitude as well as our strengths. Such moral respect requires having to think through the implications of how we are related and socially located in complex matrices of power that form and deform us in different ways. As William Chase puts it,

Diversity, [then] is not casual liberal tolerance of anything and everything not yourself. It is not polite accommodation. Instead, diversity is, in ac-
tion, the sometimes painful awareness that other people, other races, other voices, other habits of mind have as much integrity of being, as much claim on the world as you do.... And I urge you, amid all the differences present to the eye and mind, to reach out to create the bond that...will protect us all. We are meant to be here together.24

Justice is a collective mutuality rooted in compassion in which we share one another’s fate, promote one another’s well-being, and learn to cross borders that defy our being here together.25 Complex diversity requires us to imagine an ethics and praxis of resisting various oppressions and co-operating with others in struggles to work for, rather than against, life. Traditions of holy hospitality and improvisation that welcome strangers where we are not only hosts but also guests around much larger tables of God are practices of sharing brokenness and belonging where we feed and are fed.26 Then, as Sharon Welch says,

Our communities, our work for justice, can be as audacious as the compositions of [jazz musicians]. As we listen to each other, as we are open to seeing and playing off our limits and strengths, weaknesses and possibilities, what happens with all of our strategies, our coalitions, our communities, even our work for justice? It swings.27

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1 This article is adapted from a lecture given at the St. Jerome’s Centre for Catholic Experience at St. Jerome’s University in Waterloo, Ontario on April 7, 2005. I thank especially David Seljak for his invitation and hospitality.


3 This definition of diversity is from That All May Be One: A Resource For Educating Toward Racial Justice, ed. Wenh-In Ng (Toronto: Justice, Global and Ecumenical Relations of The United Church of Canada, 2004), 80.


9 Mary McClintock Fullerson, Changing the Subject: Women’s Discourses and Feminist Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 4-5.


16 Janet Jakobsen, Working Alliances, 56.


19 Practices include honouring the body, household economics, keeping Sabbath, discernment, forgiveness, healing, and shaping communities. These and other everyday activities are called practices because “they address fundamental human needs and conditions through concrete human acts. Practices are done together and over time. And through them we come to perceive how our daily lives are all tangled up with the things God is doing in the world.” Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass, “Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith” in Practicing Our Faith, ed. Dorothy Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 5.


23 See Mary McClintock Fullerson, Changing the Subject, 4.


25 This formulation of justice and community is adapted from David Wellman, Sustainable Diplomacy: Ecology, Religion and Ethics in Muslim-Christian Relations (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 40-41.
