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The enthronement of compassion and care and the unseating of customary obligation in the parable of the good Samaritan

ABSTRACT

The article studies the parable of the compassionate and caring Samaritan as source of radical lessons in dispensing care. In the parable, Jesus stressed that the dispensing of care should be primary and conformity to customary obligations are to be subordinated. This study primarily examines the power of obligatory customs that Jesus “overpowered” and attempts to elaborate on the following reasons why Jesus had to dethrone customary obligations. First, traditional customs turned prejudices have debilitating effects on character, behaviour, and moral agency. Secondly, overcoming negative prejudices will free our minds for creative responses and lead us toward a better understanding of compassionate care as possessing a divine character.

1. INTRODUCTION

Jesus of Nazareth displayed unconventional actions that simultaneously stressed the primacy of the well-being of persons (healing [Matt. 12:9-13; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-11] or harvesting [Matt. 12:1-2] on a Sabbath; no washing of hands before eating [Luke 11:38]; dining with sinners [Mark 2:13-17]; forgiving sinners [Matt. 9:1-3]). He went against the strict observance of customary obligations, in order to bring *shalom* closer to those who suffer

from material and sociological deprivations.¹ Such gestures, in favour of persons' well-being but that resist customs, may paint the person of Jesus as a transgressor or a rebel. This opposition-to-custom/in-support-of-the-needy position of Jesus is portrayed in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. I will refer to it as the parable of the compassionate and caring Samaritan. There were no section headings in the earliest Greek manuscripts of the Gospels. This absence of chapter divisions or section headings did not lend to easy reading or referencing. As scribes did their work, marginal notes were added: chapter divisions (*kephalaia*) and section headings (*titloi*). The *titlos* is a heading placed in the margin and describing the contents of the chapter. Luke 10:25-29 has the following heading: "Concerning the questioning lawyer", and Luke 10:30-37, "Concerning the man who fell into the hands of the robbers". The Good Samaritan title is still absent in the Wycliffe (1382), Tyndale (1522), Douay-Rheims (1582), and King James (1611) bibles (see Goswell 2009:162; Metzger 2005:34-36; Manser 2003:153).

The parable of the compassionate and caring Samaritan is itself a lesson in favour of dispensing care, even if this would entail rejecting customary obligations that have the implied force of law. This parable teaches that care should be extended to persons in dire need or to those in critical situations, even when customary-moral obligations stand in the way. In the parable, Jesus insisted that dispensing care should be primary and conformity to customs should be subordinated. This position advocates for the avoidance of inurement to social customs, in order to make way for creative behaviours that would simultaneously lead to a rethinking or transformation of customs.

It is thus necessary to understand the power of obligatory customs that Jesus "overpowered" and to discover deeper reasons for this kind of approach. The following discussion about Jesus' unconventional ways will show that traditional customs turned prejudices have debilitating effects on character, behaviour, and moral agency, and that overcoming negative prejudices will free our minds toward creative responses and lead us into a better understanding of compassionate care as having a transcendent character.

2. INUREMENT AND HABITUATED MINDSETS

The parable of the compassionate and caring Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) is a narrative by Jesus, delivered after his initial verbal exchange with a lawyer (*nomikos*) of the Mosaic law (Luke 10:25-28). These two sections form the whole Lukan 10:25-37 pericope.

1 *Shalom* is a Hebrew word for peace, harmony, wholeness, fulfilment, prosperity, welfare, and serenity – An experience of healing, forgiving, and breaking bread as a community.

The exchange begins with the question of the *nomikos* who wanted “to prove and test” (ἐκπειράζων) Jesus: “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (10:25). Jesus asked what the *nomikos* himself would know about what is written in the law. The latter obliged with the conventional formula:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself (10:27).

Jesus approved and then added an exhortation: “You have answered correctly ... Do this, and you will live.” (10:28).

The *nomikos*, trying to regain the initiative, continued with his intention to prove and test Jesus. He asked a question that seems to entrap Jesus: “And who is my neighbour?” (10:29; Καὶ τίς ἐστὶν μου πλησίον: *mou plēsion* suggests someone who is “near”, like a fellow companion Jew). In this instance, we sense a set-up for the making of a “mistake”: If Jesus replied with the acceptable formula, “my neighbour is my fellow Jew”, he could be customary and strictly traditional, which the *nomikos* knew would not represent Jesus. The *nomikos* could be trying to ferret out from Jesus the inclusive “my neighbour is everyone” formula, that is, including foreigners. He might either try to unmask Jesus for being unfaithful to a customary obligation or to discover Jesus’ reasons for being inclusive. The *nomikos*’ question, in fact, implied that there are people who are not “my neighbours” and, either he wanted Jesus, if his intention is sinister, to be condemned by the presumably “xenophobic” audience, or, if his intention is enlightenment, he really wanted to know if keeping the customary formula is right or wrong. With the exchange ending in the transformation of the *nomikos*’ perspective, it would be reasonable to accept the latter, although one might claim that he initially had a malicious intention.

Among the Jews, the answer to the “my neighbour” question could expose loyalty or disloyalty to race, religion, and community. The expectation, of course, is the conventional position, namely “my neighbour is my fellow Jew”. This position was generally held by Jews loyal to the traditions of the elders, like the Priests and Levites. It brings to mind the Leviticus 19:18 rule: “Love your neighbour as yourself”, which is framed by Joseph’s conflicting feelings of vengeance and love toward his brothers who sold him to slavery. Ultimately, the love for the fellow-Israelite-family won – and this is the determining meaning of the *lere’aka kamoka* (“your neighbour who is like yourself,” that is, as one similar to one’s Israelite-self) (see Carmichael 2017:174-178; Muraoka 1978:295).

The “my neighbour is my fellow Jew” standpoint is a customary one, becoming an obligatory position for ordinary Jews. Like all social-cultural customs, it serves as a norm that forms and gives shape to people’s habits

and character. Culture, handed down from generation to generation through customary socialisations, survives not only in things such as artifacts or traditional icons outside us, but also in our own bodies and minds as enduring ways of apprehending, thinking, feeling, and acting.² Culture is observable in personal dispositions (Greek, *έθος* = customs on the level of the individual; character) as well as in daily routines. Individual dispositions mirror the commonly-shared sociocultural dispositions (Greek, *ἥθος* = customs on the social level) as we are inclined to behave according to society's pre-established points of view, lifestyles, and paths: cultural beliefs, rituals, customary practices, and organisations/set-ups. Aristotle's book on ethics is entitled *Ἠθικὰ Νικομάχεια* and not *Εθικὰ Νικομάχεια*. Aranguren (1997:22) speaks of *ἥθος* (*éthos*) as "el suelo firme, el fundamento de la *práxis*, la raíz de la que brotan todos los actos humanos".³ He distinguishes *ἥθος* from *έθος*, the former having a wider social character from where *έθος* is derived as individual custom or habit. The proper etymology of *ethics*, he says, is from the term *ἥθος* (Aranguren 1997:21).

To a great extent and through an extended time, popular culture exerts influence on personal custom. We are guided and even prompted by our culture as it forms, directs, and determines our ways through the ingraining presence of significant relations and interactions; as a consequence, our behaviour also reproduces and reinforces culture and society.

Cultural and social standards are generally regarded as guiding and leading individuals toward values, even if those values are ambivalent in their moral directions. When children adapt themselves to the standard scripts, it is more likely that they are following traditional paths and imitating the elders; especially those paths certified by ancestors as sure ways toward the flourishing of life.⁴ When they adapt to or adopt a pattern of behaviour commonly pre-judged as productive or good, they avoid a meticulous process of discernment. We are inclined to imitate⁵ and adopt the ways of models who came before us. The common and persistent mimetic behaviour is for social integration and survival.

The regular and gradual process of enculturation (formation of culture) in us ensures the deep-seated nature of customary perspectives and behaviour. The hundreds of years of environmental and mental factors comprising/covering the Jews' histories of exile, struggles in the desert, alliance formation, conquests of lands, and settlement in Palestine solidified the

2 See the idea of enduring dispositions [*habitus*] in Bourdieu (1977; 1984).

3 Translation: the firm ground, the foundation of praxis, the root from which all human acts spring/burst forth/sprout.

4 For social scripting, see Gagnon & Simon (2005:13, 290, 312).

5 For mimetic triangulation, see Girard (1965:1-52) and Steinmair-Pösel (2017:185-192).

Jewish perspective about “my neighbour” as “my fellow Jew” (see Shanks *et al.* 2012; Halpern 2012:60-84; Gottwald 1979). These experiences ensured the development of durable and objectified belief about “my neighbour” that eventually lodged in a similar durable and formed subject’s mindset. Such was the hardened disposition that Jesus encountered in the question: “Who is my neighbour?”

The unconventional answer, “my neighbour includes everyone”, is also a reflection of the development and growth of a broadening, but deviating, cosmopolitan perspective of the Hellenised Jews and especially those from the “more cosmopolitan Galilee” during the time of Jesus (see Thiede 2004). This uncommon turn was unacceptable to many traditional Jews. The inclusive cosmopolitan answer, however, does not fully reflect Jesus’ position which is more novel and unexpected.

3. THE PARABLE

Instead of directly answering the question of the *nomikos*, Jesus narrated the parable of the compassionate and caring Samaritan.⁶ Through this parable, Jesus forced the *nomikos* (and the crowd that gathered around them) to look not only into the “my neighbour” issue but also into other pre-established beliefs, including their long-standing negative prejudices against outsiders – Samaritans and merchants.

The narrative is composed of several scenarios that set off a process of interrogating customs and inured mindsets.

Luke 10:30: In reply Jesus said: A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.

This scenario initially challenged and simultaneously quizzed and puzzled Jesus’ listeners since the victim was “stripped” of his clothes. The person’s physical condition cried for help but his nakedness raised the issue of identity and its resolution could either facilitate or falter a response of assistance. If the ordinary Jews’ minds are dictated by the xenophobic “my neighbour” code, they are forced to enter into a process of questioning and hesitation (not discernment) because the victim was without clothes: “Is this a fellow Jew who should be assisted? Or, one from another group who does not qualify as a neighbour?”. It was a situation of the absence of a social marker that brought

6 This proposed title of the parable reflects the centrality of the Samaritan’s gut-wrenching feeling of compassion (*ἐσπλαγχνίσθη*, Luke 10:33; *esplanchnísthi*) that he himself expressed through a sustained care (Luke 10:33-37).

a powerful disposition and habituated mindsets to the surface. Jews could be identified by their clothing and other identifiers as they are commanded to attach tassels (*tzitzit*) to the four corners of their garments to remind them of the commandments of the Torah, and that one of the strings should be *Techelet*, a blue colour (see Num. 15:37-39; Deut. 22:12).

Luke 10:31-32: A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³²So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

In the next scenario, Jesus dramatically showed the listeners how an exclusive “my neighbour” formula incapacitates prosocial behaviour – that is, how a certain fidelity to customs could sacrifice solidarity with the weak or vulnerable. The Priest and the Levite saw the absence of societal markers on the victim’s body which, for them, were important signs/signals to extend help. Since they did not extend help to an unidentifiable individual, it would be reasonable to say that if the victim had the clothes of a foreigner, they would have behaved similarly. However, in the parable, they were still unsure about the identity of the victim and yet their behaviour already indicated no desire to help. The “my neighbour is my fellow Jew” formula ruled their heads; this itself was overpowering. Without any marks to point to the pre-established identity of the neighbour, the mind stopped from further assessing the situation. They were intent on following the formula’s letter which already functioned as quasi-dogma, that even the reminder to extend assistance to a fellow Jew did not cross their minds: they failed to verify whether the victim was circumcised the way Jews circumcise their own boys, since “Samaritans practice circumcision without *peri’ah*, the rending of the corona ... whereas the Jews do rend the corona” (Crown 1991:21).

It must be mentioned that commentaries that invoke the “defilement-purity” argument are problematic (Karris 1992:702; Fitzmyer 1985:887; Gourgues 1998:709). This “defilement-purity” argument is no longer tenable. First, the temple authorities are “going down from Jerusalem to Jericho” and not to the temple located in Jerusalem. Secondly, the argument only applies to the Priest and not to the Levite (see Hedrick 2016:219).

The non-helping behaviour of the temple authorities painfully illustrated the real power of viewpoints that are straight-jacketed by customary codes. Traditional Jews, like the Priest and the Levite of the parable, would thus have the greatest trouble deciding whether to help the troubled person or not because of their ethnic, religious, or cultural allegiance.

Love of neighbour, as it was then understood, was to be exercised toward Priests, Levites, and true members of Israel, which thus excluded Samaritans (Gourgues 1998:713).

The parable's exaggerated portrayal of the impotence of the Priest and the Levite in front of a dying person thus served not simply to challenge the cultic and legalistic tendencies of their religion. It really brought home the point that an exclusive solidarity is totally unreliable and wrong. Inurement to "my neighbour is my fellow Jew" shaped and turned rigid the priestly and levitical minds. The pre-fed social codes in the brain would, many times, freeze the capacity for something different (see Stürmer & Snyder 2010:33-58). Those codes became reinforced and hardened by experiences and would eventually form, in a person, the lack of ability to respond creatively. Some hardened codes are also present in the older brother's accusation in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-31); in the rule of the Sabbath against work, even if this is done to heal the sick (Matt. 12:11); in the rule of washing of hands before meals (Matt. 15:2), and so forth.

Some cognitive and behavioural inurement of contemporary market society could help illuminate further the parable's exposé of hard social codes: farmers destroy their surplus after meeting their quota imposed by the government (stability of prices and profits are more important than sharing the milk to the malnourished of underdeveloped countries); banana plantations-producers dump excess to protect market prices (commercial interests are more important than the sharing of food).

Luke 10:33-37: ³³But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

The scenario that really surprised and confronted the *nomikos* and the crowd was the introduction of the Samaritan who was presumably a merchant (Van Eck 2019:a5499), and who is portrayed as the individual who had compassion (ἐσπλαγγίσθη, Luke 10:33; esplanchnísthi) and the one who was able to care for the victim. The insertion of the Samaritan in the parable had a jarring (code-shattering) effect on the *nomikos* and the crowd, since it departed from the traditional religious composition of "Priests, Levites, and all the people". The formulations may vary,

but ancient Judaism and the OT use this tripartite division ['Priests, Levites, and all the people', 'the priests and the Levites and the people of Israel', 'the priests, the Levites, and the children of Israel'] in order to give account of the composition of religious society in its diversity (Gourgues 1998:710).

More jarring perhaps is the kind of person attached to the label, Samaritan:

the despised half breed, or more precisely the despised descendant of the unlawful marriages of Jews and Gentiles centuries earlier (Blomberg 2013:29).

This judgment on the Samaritans is also reflected in the way in which the Jews passed judgment on Jesus: "Aren't we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?" (John 8:48).

The other surprising element raised by the introduction of the Samaritan is his possible identity as a merchant, "one of the most despised figures in the 1st-century advanced agrarian world", who was, from the Jews' perspective, anomalous to the flow of the story (Van Eck 2019:a5499). He was, however, moved with compassion. In verse 33, Luke mentions that only the Samaritan had compassion on him, using the most powerful Greek word, *ἐσπλαγχνίσθη*, for a gut level response of love. All of Jesus' healing ministry emerged from this gut level emotion, *ἐσπλαγχνίσθη* – to be moved in the inward parts; a visceral feeling; to have compassion (see Amato 1986:633-641). He was also able to translate this powerful gut emotion into life-saving sustained care (see Ricoeur 1965:98-109). Pope Francis' words are relevant: "Paradoxically, those who claim to be unbelievers can sometimes put God's will into practice better than believers." (*Fratelli Tutti* 74). The Samaritan, seemingly unmindful of his own safety, further secured the victim by bringing him to an inn.

The inn and innkeeper rather function in the parable to help in identifying the Samaritan for what he is, namely, a despised merchant. This, for the 1st-century listener of the parable, would have been abnormal; a merchant, who normally exploits people, shows remarkable compassion (Van Eck & Van Niekerk 2018:a5195).

His assistance was sustained for the full recovery of the victim's well-being. ("Look after him," he said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have."). In this instance, we could imagine the *nomikos* and the crowd being challenged to break down their obstructive stereotyping about the Samaritan/merchant whose identity is not saddled with the obligatory "my neighbour" customary code.

4. *ELEOS* AND THE *NOMIKOS*' ENLIGHTENMENT

Luke 10:36-37: ³⁶Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?' ³⁷The expert in the law replied, 'The one who had mercy on him.'

The final scenario is revelatory and one that profited from the previous exposé of inurement, the critique on labelling people, the rehabilitation of identities, and the enthronement of compassion/*ἐσπλαγχνίσθη*. Jesus' question is also an interrogation of the standard meaning of neighbour as "the beneficiary of assistance": "Which of these three do you think was a neighbour (*plēsion*) to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?".

The *nomikos* question, "Who is my neighbour?," is now being righted by a more appropriate question that not only provokes and leads to reversal of expectations, but also reveals the right kind of neighbour (one who gives and not one who receives), driven by compassion (*ἐσπλαγχνίσθη*), and able to mirror the divine quality of mercy (*ἔλεος*) through sustained care.

Jesus' question made the *nomikos* realise that the "compassionate dispenser" and not the "pitiably object" of care is "neighbour". His enlightened/enlightening reply would also alert us to the possibility of breaking down hardened mindsets: "The one who showed mercy (*ἔλεος*) on him." The term *ἐσπλαγχνίσθη*; *esplanchnisthi*, used by Luke to refer to compassion, is now replaced with the suggestive *ἔλεος* (*eleos*, mercy). *Eleos* will take readers to an older Exodus text: "The Lord is God, compassionate and merciful, longsuffering and full of mercy and truth ..." (Ex. 34.6); or to the Magnificat's "His mercy [*ἔλεος*] extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation" (Luke 1:50). This statement of the *nomikos* reaffirms the truth that we have to show mercy to people as God has shown mercy to us (Lane 2009:74-84); it also reveals that "light" has finally dawned on him – that the *nomikos* has gone beyond customary codes (see Rule 2017). The crowd may also have realised that anybody, even a disagreeable or "despicable" character who translates one's felt compassion into sustained care, would be able to reflect the *eleos*/mercy of God.

One cannot love God without loving others. The lawyer's assertion shows that he recognized the Samaritan's mercy as mirroring that of YHWH (Lane 2009:82).

5. CONCLUSION

Most of the time, social customs become a person's basis of right behaviour and action. They are learned mimetically from the earliest years of child formation and are shapers of deep and natural inclinations: for feeding one's need for social acceptance, for satisfying cravings of the opinions of others, for survival, or for forming intimacies and solidarities. Socialisation brings about internalisation of social customs, beliefs, rituals, organisations, hierarchy, and other routine practices. Before individuals are even born, certain beliefs already possess a certain solidity in the form of pre-established objects of formation of thought, affection, and action.

Customs also present themselves as prejudices or biases of a certain culture/society. Prejudices, whether tending "toward animality" or "toward humanity" are powerful drivers of behaviour. The Priest and the Levite have not become masters of their biases. We even make some despicable prejudices to measure what is supposed to be right or wrong. The ideas about Black as evil, brown as inferior, and female as weak are based on the handing-down of beliefs and other traditions considered necessary to keep a social group's perceived place or status in the order of things.

Nevertheless, we are also victims of our own dispositions that are not necessarily despicable. In many instances, when we habitually follow what is accepted as good or pursue that which is licit or legal, we unintentionally produce what could be injurious to persons or to nature. The unintended unpleasant by-products of routines to bring about good are there staring at us openly (like the production of Tesla electric cars that also produce "blood batteries" and child labour) (Das 2022); or earning bigger income through multiple jobs or overtime work become loss of time with the family and other intimacies or solidarities. We eventually end up focusing on what we regard as good and become oblivious of (or selectively blind to) what most of us cannot accept; and we go on multiplying many unintended wrongs or mistakes. Such tendencies are common and have massively influenced the formation of natural appetites.

A great amount of unpredictable or unintended consequences, many of them negative, form part and parcel of what we call social and cultural patterns of life. Not only that, sewn into the fabric of life are the fragile threads that easily break, creating gaps that cause innumerable unintended miseries to many people (or destruction and devastation to nature). Nevertheless, even in the glaring presence of suffering brought about by shared habits, we still cling on to what we have inherited; culture thus survives, even when it is imperfect and full of holes. The Priest and the Levite are our undesirable "model" culture-bearers for that negative behaviour that perpetuates prejudices.

The imperfection and fragility of culture mark our ways and dispositions. In other words, we carry in ourselves and in our ways the ambivalence of culture and state of affairs. Our skills, abilities, and sense of freedom carry with them ample amount of culture's limits and society's flaws. All products of human minds and hands have been saddled by these limits and flaws; this characterises a "normal" human predicament, the human condition. Nothing produced by human beings is free from the fragility of human dispositions, human ambivalence, and the ambiguities of nature and the social order. That is what Jesus wanted for the *nomikos* to examine in himself.

The parable of the compassionate and caring Samaritan has made us aware of the agent-neighbour and *eleos* ideas that are not only talking about inclusivity but also rearranging and reassigning the place of the divine to also take place on the ground and in the agency of people, whether they are disreputable or not. The divine, therefore, does not remain on high to control a systemic order of arrangements and classification; the divine moves in various places at all times when people become compassionate and caring neighbours to their fellow neighbours who are suffering.

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