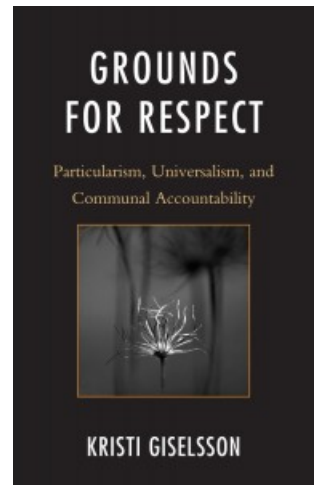


Review: Grounds for Respect



It's taken me a while to digest this book by local academic and author, Kristi Giselsson. Kristi is a compassionate and articulate philosopher who has made balanced and thoughtful contributions to the public debate on a number of social issues recently.

This book *Grounds for Respect: Particularism, Universalism, and Communal Accountability* is a published version of her doctoral thesis in philosophy at the University of Tasmania.

It is an exploration of "the question of what grounds are needed in order to justify respect for others." (Page 1).

This is a fundamental question, the diverse answers to which contribute a great deal to the unspoken (and often unknown) assumptions that shape and guide the cross-purposed conversations that epitomise public dialogue.

Giselsson's contribution is to explore this using philosophical analysis and critique. This necessarily involves a philosopher talking about philosophers, because that is how such an analysis works: positions are described, clarified, analysed for their differences; their implications are drawn, their internal and external logic put under test; and finally a path of good thought and good conscience is found through the heady tangle of these broad-shouldered giants.

For myself, this was my first introduction to this level of philosophical treatise. I came to the book motivated by the practical and socio-political applications: when you're talking about personhood issues such as abortion, euthanasia, marriage, freedom of speech and so on, then the nature and basis of *respect* is of significant relevance. I was struck, however, by the philosophical exploration itself.

I have only had one experience like it, when I first studied church history in my BMin studies, suddenly I had insight into where people were coming from, what motivated them, and why.

Similarly, Giselsson's exploration of the pedigree of philosophical thought, the sort of thought that is currently and actively applied in our Western World, gave me new insights. It also made me thirsty to learn more, hence my current little project.

Giselsson's thesis is that "some form of *universalism* is needed to ground respect for the particular; in order to justify why we should respect others" (Page 2). Universalism is the sense of *moral universalism* which asserts that there is a particular system of standard, morality or ethic that can be applied universally and which is not contingent on the particulars of a person (e.g. their rationality or autonomy).

Giselsson also emphasises a foundational *humanism* as a necessary aspect of our notions of respect. This is "humanism" as an affirmation of an innate, non-contingent, ontological, and unique reality (and value) of the human person.

The form of Giselsson's argument therefore includes an exploration and ultimate rebuttal of posthumanist philosophers such as Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard (all of whom I now want to read for myself).

...posthumanist critiques of universalist assumptions within humanism are themselves based on unacknowledged ethical assumptions of universal value and respect for others... (Page

2)

...at the very heart of Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard's critique of humanism lay a moral judgment; that universalism is inherently unjust in its apparent exclusion of particular others... this ethical judgment is made without recourse to any justificatory philosophical grounds, but rather relies on the force of its rhetorical – and ultimately humanist – appeal alone. This ethical rejection of universal humanism has in turn had an enormous impact over a wide range of disciplines, but specifically in those areas of scholarship that deal with those traditionally marginalized within Western philosophy..." (Page 117)

The broad brush strokes of the argument might be characterised by breadth and depth. This first part of the book is a consideration of depth – is anything less than universalism enough to provide a coherent basis for respect? Giselsson shows that posthumanism either fails to provide for respect, or where it asserts its claim that it can, it has actually slipped into the universalism (albeit usually of a less caricatured sort) that is trying to be avoided.

The second part of the book looks at the breadth question and therefore tests the bounds of humanism. In particular, could animals be included as "human" to the extent that respect can be both encapsulated and applied? This second consideration tests utilitarian approaches such as that of Singer. Giselsson shows that while a utilitarian approach looks to assess a person's particular characteristics or functions to justify respect, a humanist approach asserts common ontological or innate grounds that are more robust.

By way of example:

Dismissive views of the elderly and those suffering from dementia are only affirmed by utilitarian principles that emphasize the greater good of society and the

*comparative worthlessness of a cognitively impaired life.
(Page 175)*

Having drawn the broad boundaries. Giselsson turns to those who thinking is within the bounds of universalist humanism and examines their formulation for grounds for respect. The thread being followed here is not the extent of human being but the characteristics – self-determination, self-creativity, accountability, subjecthood and the like are all explored. She finds them wanting for her purposes:

I have also argued that current Western liberal and humanist theories that attempt to readdress the foundations needed for universal respect still conceptualize these grounds in terms of what characteristics an individual must possess in order to qualify for equal moral consideration. These grounds still revolve around traditional notions of moral personhood, these being selfdetermination, rationality and autonomy; and they inevitably exclude all humans not possessing such qualities. (Page 259)

Giselsson therefore posits her own formulation of human being, which has to do not with biology or economic characteristics but with our “way of being” (Page 260). She therefore emphasises *community* as a necessary and innate part of human personhood and demonstrates that a concept for respect can rest upon the operation of accountability within and from the human community. She explores this conception for inconsistencies and negative implications and concludes:

The ontological foundation I have offered, while partial rather than complete in its conception, seeks to balance the tension between particularism and universalism by showing a structure of human morality that is irreducibly communal in its practice. Moreover, while arguing that the inter-dependent practices of social standards of value and reciprocal accountability are thoroughly communal in nature,

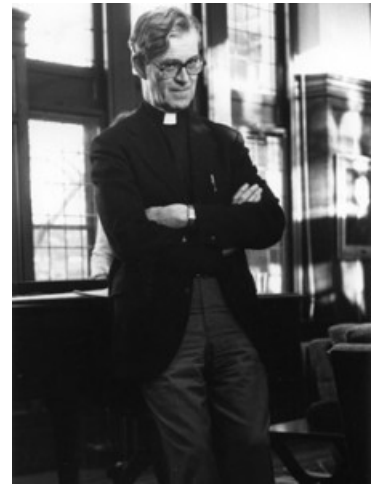
the universal standard of value implied by the assumption of reciprocal accountability – that each human is an end in themselves – ensures that justice is not reduced to communal consensus alone, as this standard provides for the possibility of respect for particular individuals beyond the relative nature of localized and particular norms (Page 296)

The foundation that Giselsson offers is indeed “partial rather than complete” because while she circumscribes respect with the well-argued conception of communal accountability she stops short, understandably, before filling that notion with articulations of what particular behaviours or attitudes or beliefs might be worthy of being held to account. Therefore, while she has demonstrated grounds for respect without recourse to divine revelation, I question whether she could build upon those grounds without doing so.

This book took some time to digest. It made me realise how little I know and how much I need to know about the philosophical tendrils that generate and move the values and people of our society. There is so much lack of respect, belligerence and assertions and misuse of one another in Western Society. Much of it comes from those sections of society who espouse care and tolerance and love yet find it so hard to articulate respect and understanding and community outside of their own narrow bands.

This book has made me thirsty to know more, to explore in particular some of the 20th Century philosophers who influenced the current generation of culture-shapers. To that end this book has whet my appetite. And that makes it a good book!

Review: Stendahl's The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West



I have embarked on a self-imposed project to explore the links between the New Perspective and a new apologia.

It seemed good to begin with Krister Stendahl's 1963 classic article, The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West. It's a short piece that is a good insight into the beginnings of the New Perspectives movement. It raises the basic questions pertaining to the disparities between the Pauline, Reformation and modern milieux and chases these down some hermeneutical rabbit holes.

Not that Stendahl goes too deep. It's a pleasant read which gives the broad brushstrokes and only glimpses of the obvious academic rigour that lies underneath.

It suits my purposes to summarise and condense his argument, codifying and storing away the framework as I continue my wider exploration.

Point #1 – The modern world wrestles with matters of

introspection and individual conscience. This is not what Paul-the-fomer-Pharisee wrestles with.

Stendahl uses the psycho-social term “introspection” and “introspective conscience.” It is crucial but short-hand language and he never unpacks exactly what he means by it.

Here is a connection point between Pauline hermeneutic and the modern world which is at the heart of my project. The hermeneutical end of this connection is Stendahl’s phrase “Pauline awareness of sin” for which, Stendahl suggests, we have a primarily Lutheran and Augustinian lens that is not entirely aligned with Paul’s concerns.

Stendahl’s insistence is that Paul has had no real problem with law keeping; after all, the Law includes elements of grace despite the Lutheran law-grace dichotomy. Paul’s concern is with the Law itself, not with the keeping of it.

It was not to him a restoration of a plagued conscience; when he says that he now forgets what is behind him (Phil 3:13), he does not think about the shortcoming of his obedience to the Law, but about his glorious achievements as a righteous Jew, achievements which he nevertheless has now learned to consider as “refuse” in the light of his faith in Jesus as the Messiah. (200-201)

Yes, there is an impossibility about keeping the law. But the real issue is that even when Paul is righteous ‘according to the Law’ it is nothing to the grace now revealed in Jesus.

The communal & covenantal emphases of the New Perspective is apparent here. For Stendahl, Paul’s concern is not to assuage individual conscience but to demonstrate that the two communities – those who have lived under the old covenant of Law, and those who have been a Law unto themselves – now must approach God in the same way, through Christ.

Point #2 – Paul-the-Christian’s introspection is not shaped

around a personal wrestle with sin.

A comparison is made here between the Pauline world and the world of the Reformation in which Luther stood firmly on the legacy of Augustine, who was the “first modern man” (205) who “may well have been one of the first to express the dilemma of the introspective conscience” (203).

“It is in response to their [the Augustine/Lutheran milieu] question, “How can I find a gracious God?” that Paul’s words about a justification in Christ by faith, and without the works of the Law, appears as the liberating and saving answer... (203)

Augustine and the Church was by and large under the impression that Paul dealt with those issues with which he actually deals: 1) What happens to the Law (the Torah, the actual Law of Moses, not the principle of legalism) when the Messiah has come? – 2) What are the ramifications of the Messiah’s arrival for the relation between Jews and Gentiles? For Paul had not arrived at his view of the Law by testing and pondering its effect upon his conscience; it was his grappling with the question about the place of the Gentiles in the Church and in the plan of God... (204)

Paul’s chief concern was about the inclusion of the Gentiles into Christ-centred grace, not the exclusion of sin-wracked Jews from grace because of their Law. Paul’s own “conversion” is not so much an individual relief of conscience, but a prophetic (and very Jewish) call to be the Apostle to the Gentiles to gather those who are now included.

To break into commentary for a second – this is a useful consideration. I recognised many years ago that the great evangelistic sermons of Acts do not accord with the evangelistic shape of the modern age. Here I see in Stendahl an exploration of why this is so.

Point #3 – The Introspective Conscience framework gives rise to hermeneutical difficulties.

This section is the most valuable part of the article. Stendahl unpacks some considerable implications. The launching point is this:

Where Paul was concerned about the possibility for Gentiles to be included in the messianic community, his statements are now read as answers to the quest for assurance about man's salvation out of a common human predicament. (206)

Paul's concern is to demonstrate that

Once the Messiah had come, and once the faith in Him – not "faith" as a general religious attitude – was available as the decisive ground for salvation, the Law had done its duty as a custodian for the Jews. (206)

But

In the common interpretation of Western Christianity, the matter looks very different. One could even say that Paul's argument has been reversed into saying the opposite to his original intention. (206)

The Law, which was for Paul an obsoleted custodian *for the Jews* until the coming of Christ (in which Christ himself is prefigured in the gracious aspects of the Law), has become the tool of introspection – a custodian that takes *each of us individually* to Christ by crushing us with its righteousness.

There is a true disparity here and Stendahl helps us know what is at stake. It is the shape of the gospel of itself, and certainly the defining points of an effective kerygma.

Paul's argument that the Gentiles must not, and should not come to Christ via the Law, i.e., via circumcision etc., has

turned into a statement according to which all men must come to Christ with consciences properly convicted by the Law and its insatiable requirements for righteousness. (207)

Point #4 – Modern introspective exegesis can be rebutted.

Stendahl finally gets to his positive consideration of the matter and gives a quick rendition of the New Perspective lens (and, yes, he does use the term “new perspective” in passing (214)). My summation is this:

1) Sin is real. “Rom 1-3 sets out to show that all – both Jews and Gentiles – have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God.” This is properly conceived as covenantal sin of peoples, not the travailing conscience of individuals. (208)

2) Paul’s personal awareness of sin is not a present wrestle of conscience, but a past fact of his persecuting actions against the people of God. Paul uses this to speak of the covenantal inclusion of the godless – as a rhetorical device, not a conclusion. If “Paul’s enmity to Jesus Christ and the church” can be “gloriously and gracefully blotted out”, how much more can God justify the “weak and sinful and rebellious” (209)

3) Paul’s consideration of present troubles is one of “weakness” and attack from the enemy. When it comes to matters of conscience he more readily speaks of victory in Christ and “his good conscience before men and God.” (210)

4) Romans 7, which is meant to be the epitome of introspection is actually an “acquittal” of the Christ-focussed ego, “not one of utter contrition.” This is because Romans 7 is an argument in which good (but ineffective and obsoleted) Law can be made distinct from “bad Sin.”

“If I do what I do not want, then it is not I who do it, but the sin which dwells in me.”... This distinction makes it

possible for Paul to blame Sin and Flesh, and to rescue the Law as a good gift of God.” (212)

We should not read a trembling and introspective conscience into a text which is so anxious to put the blame on Sin, and that in such a way that not only the Law but the will and mind of man are declared good and are found to be on the side of God. (214)

Stendahl's considerations are not without difficulty, both exegetically and practically. I am driven to read Romans in particular and to weigh Stendahl up against Scripture. I am concerned practically in the downplaying of present sin in terms of weakness and enemy attack; it seems but a variation on “the devil made me do it.”

Nevertheless, this has been an intriguing and enjoyable beginning to my little project. I will move from here either backwards to Augustine, or forwards to Dunn and Wright and others who have progressed the New Perspective. I'll probably do both.

Can the New Perspective be a New Apologia?

In my current role I get to spend a lot of time at the interaction between public discourse, the thought-life and momenta of culture, and the application of Christian theology and devotion. It's a muddled space to play with a lot of speaking at cross purposes and a fast reducing amount of common ground.



I've reached a point of both frustration and passion.

The frustration comes from the level of misunderstanding and presumption that exists, particularly about how others view Christians and Christian thought. Our philosophical framework is ignored, our motivations are questioned, and our ambitions rejected. This is very understandable. As a friend of mine articulated to me recently "We Christians are like bad students. The world is asking the same questions, and being frustrated by its same lack of answers, and we come along and say 'The answer is JAY-sus.' And we don't bother to show our working."

"We don't bother to show our working." Yep. And ouch.

Over the ages there have been those that seek to show our "working out." These are the *apologists* (from the word *apologia* which means 'a formal written defense of one's opinions or conduct' which is synonymous with *apology* but you can't use that because it sounds like you're sorry for something...) And so the "first" apologist, Justin Martyr, showed his "working out" of the reasonableness (in both the moral and logical sense) Christianity in a context while defending against some common misunderstandings of Christians.

Many centuries later on we have those that defend against the rationalism and modernist experiment of the Enlightenment.

And more recently some engagement with postmodernity

(although I find many of these are delivering an apology for modernity, not Christianity, but that's another topic...)

I am simply not satisfied with the depths of our current apologia. A *defense* is a *responsive* exercise that is necessarily shaped by the context and the audience. We either ignore that context and audience and do the stereotypical bible bash; or we misunderstand our context and audience to the point of being rendered irrelevant.

So I am thirsty to *understand* our context. I've been reading some books that have engaged with philosophical theories that were fomenting in the mid 20th Century. The little I could quickly grasp gave me that "aha" moment: "*This* is where they are coming from, this is why they are saying, doing, teaching this and that. *This* is how they hear us when we say..." etc. etc.

So my resolution is this: **To learn more.** I want to join in with the unpacking of the Western World philosophically (and perhaps sociologically). I want to read a book a week from the ***top ten primary sources that have shaped or describe the Western World.***

Any recommendations?

Similarly, the passion, derives from an utter commitment that the gospel is, well, good news. And remains so. I have always aspired to be as kerygmatic (from the word *kerygma* which means 'proclamation') as possible. The gospel is gospel only when it is proclaimed. The gospel demands kerygma.

Effective kerygma is thus a combination of hermeneutic, homiletic, and applied ethics in which the gospel connects and enlivens the surrounding context.

In recent times the best kerygma I have witnessed (in my slight reading) has come from the school of thought that has been tagged as the "New Perspectives on Paul." This is the

stuff of Krister Stendahl and N.T. Wright and in my mind speaks to a framework that is high levels of realism. It emphasises community and activity, not simply as conceptual responses to revelational truth, but as innate fundamentals of divine historical interaction with the world.

My hunch is that there is an apologetic connection between New Perspectives and the currents of Western thinking which has not yet been fully explored – but could bear fruit if it was.

I want to see if this is true. **I want to learn more.** I want to read a book a week ***from the top ten expositions New Perspectives commentary.***

Any recommendations?

I'll let you know how it goes.