Law, Authority, and Love

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We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion. (D&C 121:39)

It seems to me that God wants us to understand each other and interact with each other without resorting to authority. I define authority to be some assumed power or right to impose one’s will—that transcends a given context or relationship. This posture almost inevitably leads to unrighteous dominion among humans. I have come to believe that this posture is a product of the individualistic and dualistic perspectives common in Western thought.

Faulconer has thoughtfully and carefully shown us how the dualism and individualism promoted during the 1600’s have come to dominate our understanding of religions and our approaches to dealing with religious diversity. I wholeheartedly agree with his implication that we cannot hope to understand and reconcile the world’s religious diversity if we maintain individualistic and dualistic perspectives. He suggests that we should look to Heidegger and Gadamer for ways to get beyond the notion of “bounded being” (Gergen, 2009, p. 3). I agree that the Western philosophical tradition has limited us and contributed to considerable unrighteous dominion. Heidegger and Gadamer both provide important alternatives to traditional ways of understanding human diversity. I would like to suggest an additional perspective that may complement what Faulconer proposes.

Oliver (2001) tackled questions of diversity and multicultural philosophy in her book, Beyond Recognition. In framing the problem that individualism poses for understanding diverse perspectives, she explains that, “Only if we imagine ourselves forever cut off from others and the world around us do we need to create elaborate schemes for bridging the gap. We create an impossible problems for ourselves by presuming to be separated in the first place” (p. 12). Using J. J. Gibson’s (1966) ideas (among others) she proposes an alternative way of viewing difference and diversity—a relational ontology that assumes our relations with one another are fundamental. She suggests that a relational perspective changes our notion of difference so that, “Rather than functioning as an obstacle, an empty abyss between us, space is full of life that connects us to the environment sustaining us” (p. 193). In Oliver’s relational perspective, “I do not see other people in the world, I see with them” (p. 202). Oliver is essentially arguing for a relational ontology: that we are primarily relational and secondarily subjective selves (cf. Jackson, 2005). Interestingly, Oliver’s relational philosophy leads her to conclude that the means to genuine understanding of diversity is found in love. She proposes that

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Love is a choice; it is a willful decision. We can choose to love or we can choose not to love. In this regard, love is an attitude that we willingly cultivate toward others. We can choose to close ourselves off or we can choose to try to open ourselves toward others….Love is not something we choose once and for all. Rather it is a decision that must be constantly reaffirmed through the vigilance of self-reflection. (p. 220–221)

Oliver’s conclusion calls to mind the radical reframe of power and authority found at the end of Section 121 in the Doctrine and Covenants.

45 Let thy bowels also be full of charity towards all men, and to the household of faith, and let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God; and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distil upon thy soul as the dews from heaven.

46 The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion, and thy scepter an unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth; and thy dominion shall be an everlasting dominion, and without compulsory means it shall flow unto thee forever and ever.

Though it would be easy to read Oliver’s recommendations as simplistic or even shallow, it is important to understand her proposal in light of her philosophy. She is not just proposing that we be more loving. She is essentially arguing that love, at least the kind of love that is needed for true multicultural understanding, is not possible from an individualistic perspective. Traditional Western notions of the individual self preclude the kind of love she is proposing. So, in order to develop such love we will have to revise our sense of what it is to be human—right down to our ontological assumptions, our sense of what it is to be.

REFERENCES


