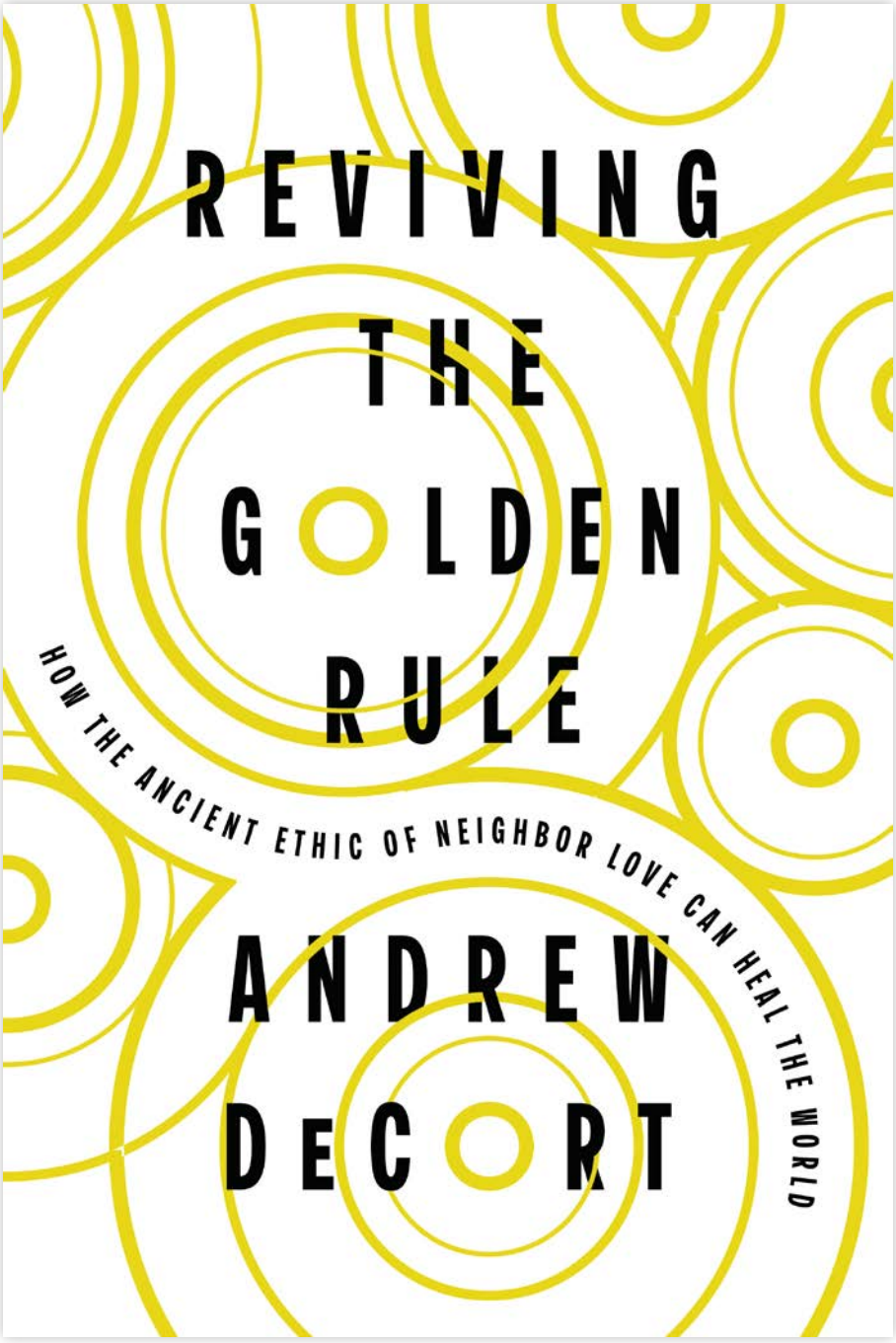

ivp | InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL
www.ivpress.com

CONTENTS

1

NEIGHBOR LOVE

The Crisis of Othering and the Hope of Humanity

May 1, 2010, was a day like any other in Addis Ababa, or so it seemed.

I was sitting at a roadside cafe eating lunch with dear friends. Betena was a favorite spot for Ethiopia's sizzling *tibbs* and sumptuous stews. As we chatted, the sun shined on our faces, and a refreshing breeze streamed over the mountains encircling Ethiopia's capital city. The University of Chicago had recently admitted me to its PhD program in theological ethics, and Lily and I were soon to be married. All was seemingly well.

But inside, my spirit was deeply troubled.

The previous year, I had returned to Addis Ababa to continue working as a pastor at one of the exploding Pentecostal churches in the city. This time, I was invited to serve as the personal assistant to the church's charismatic founder, an august man who was part of starting one of the fastest-growing Christian movements in the world. Later he became a personal friend to Ethiopia's Pentecostal prime minister.

But soon enough, I was forced to choose between my church community and my fiancée. Lily grew up in another church across town, and this marked her as "other" to my leaders. They warned that unless she "submitted" to them, she might infect their church with a "foreign spirit" through me and disrupt the church's "favor" with God. At the time, I expected to work with this community for the rest of my life. But after long and fruitless discussions, my mentor insisted on his ultimatum. I chose Lily, and I lost my place in the church.

This painful event heightened my attention to *othering*. By othering, I mean seeing "others" as unrelated or less than ourselves. It's a sense of separation from or even superiority to others. In Christian circles, othering can

be triggered by something as simple as attending a different church, despite sharing almost identical beliefs. More often, othering revolves around perceived differences of religious conviction, ethnic identity, or political affiliation. It may sound innocuous, but it's the prerequisite for normalized injustice, mass violence, and genocide.[1] When we see others as unrelated or less than ourselves, we begin to accept treating them differently than we would want to be treated. Others can be ignored or excluded. When othering becomes severe and we see others as less than human, their grief no longer saddens us, and we may see eliminating them as an existential necessity for our survival. The basic responsibilities of ethics are suspended or inverted. In many ways, I see othering as the fundamental crisis of our humanity.[2]

Soon after being excluded from my church, I began working as the interim pastor of a much smaller community across town. To get there, I needed to commute through Mexico Square—one of the city's major hubs, with a large roundabout chaotically buzzing with blue Toyota minibuses packed with people.

Mexico Square haunted my conscience and intensified my attention to othering. From early in the morning, the roundabout was lined with suffering people begging for help. One elderly woman in particular caught my attention. Her right eye was covered with milky cataracts. Her left eye had seemingly been torn out of its socket and left to dangle. It was now cocooned in flesh on her gaunt cheekbone. She, along with many others—lepers with limbs rotting off, polio survivors with legs bowed like boomerangs, small orphaned children—would plaintively cry out for care.

---

[1]When I refer to genocide in this book, I have in mind the definition used by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: "Genocide is an internationally recognized crime where acts are committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group." See "What Is Genocide," United States Memorial Holocaust Museum, accessed January 19, 2025, www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/learn-about-genocide-and-other-mass-atrocities/what-is-genocide.

[2]For important studies on or adjacent to othering, see john powell and Stephen Menendian, *Belonging Without Othering: How We Save Ourselves and the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024); Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2023); David Livingstone Smith, *On Inhumanity: Dehumanization and How to Resist It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Toni Morrison, *The Origin of Others* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); David Livingstone Smith, *Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others* (New York: St. Martin's, 2011); Sam Keen, *Faces of the Enemy: Reflections of the Hostile Imagination* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).

But they were all typically ignored or, at best, tossed a few coins. The flow of bodies in Mexico Square was river-like. Shoulder to shoulder, people were there to get somewhere else. In the process, these others became little more than obstacles in our way.

Still, it always troubled me how we could rush past these suffering people as if they weren't even there, as if we didn't see them and couldn't hear their cries of distress. Each trip through Mexico Square felt like another interrogation as I grieved the loss of my church family: Was I just another othering religious leader like the ones in Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan, who didn't stop to give their time and attention to a person left for dead on the roadside? After all, I was literally on my way to church as I routinely walked past the woman with her eye torn out and the others in Mexico Square.

○ ○ ○

Back to that sunny Saturday, my friends and I were enjoying our lunch at Betena, the roadside cafe not far from Mexico Square.

A teenage boy approached our table and asked us to help him. He was skinny and wearing a filthy hoodie. But this was typical for homeless children in Addis, and he seemed healthy enough. We told him no and continued eating.

As he turned away, his hood slipped off, and I saw that he had a horrifying wound on the back of his head. This time, Mexico Square had come to me, and I was faced with a choice. Would I play the priest again and respond to this boy as yet another other—as someone unrelated or less than myself who could be ignored and excluded from the table? Or would I follow the othered Samaritan and respond to the boy as my neighbor—as someone morally related to me and equally precious as myself?

At heart, this is the meaning of *neighbor love*. Neighbor love sees and treats others as morally connected to ourselves and equally precious in value. It's a form of what john powell calls "belonging without othering."[3] This practice embodies passionate will and practical work for others' well-being. It's a way of seeing that leads to mutual flourishing rather than caste systems, status hierarchies, and power politics. Crucially, neighbor love is far more than momentary pity or random kindness. It's a chosen way of life

[3]See powell and Menendian, *Belonging Without Othering*.

that intentionally transgresses the boundaries of othering and actively recognizes the divine value of others, including those we have been conditioned to see as strangers or enemies. This is how Jesus describes neighbor love in his parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10. The story itself was a daring defiance of othering, since Samaritans were seen as heretics, half-breeds, and enemies—certainly not *good*. Neighbor love is the abolition of othering, starting within ourselves and spreading between us like ripples in our world.

In that moment, I distinctly heard the voice of Jesus reverberate in my conscience. The voice told me, "If you say no to him, you've said no to me." After wrestling in my soul, I got up from the table and ran after him. It was one of many moments when I've learned the truth of Erich Fromm that love is a decision.[4]

Eyob (Amharic for "Job") was born in southern Ethiopia. As a small child, he had fallen into an open cooking fire in his parents' dwelling, and his head was badly burned. Sadly, his wound was never properly treated. Over the years, Eyob's wound worsened, and his parents removed him from school because the bleeding crater on the back of his head became so putrid. Eyob was seen as shameful to his community—as an other. As such, he was forced to hide his suffering in the shadows and didn't receive the medical care he so desperately needed.

Eventually, Eyob's suffering became so severe that his parents put him on a pickup truck and sent him to Addis. They told him to beg for help or die. And that's exactly how I met him: wandering the streets alone with an oozing head wound in excruciating pain.

When Eyob approached our table, I was wrestling with the meaning of my faith and the practice of neighbor love. Being expelled from my church and commuting through Mexico Square had acutely expanded my awareness of othering. After hearing the voice of Jesus like never before in my life, I felt responsible to take him to a local hospital and advocate for him to receive the care he urgently needed.

My friends and I fought for Eyob's life over the next several months with the help of international and local doctors. Those countless days with Eyob in the hospital were some of the most meaningful and joyful of my life. I

[4]Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Open Road Media, 2013).

discovered that he was full of love and brilliantly gifted. Whenever we brought him food and gifts, he would immediately start sharing them with the other children beside him. Laughter filled the burn ward.

Eyob's dream was to become a pastor and professor who could teach hope and love for people in pain. This too was my dream. I learned that this "other" was anything but unrelated or less than myself. He was a precious diamond, full of complex pain and precious worth. In my countless hours with Eyob, I experienced what bell hooks observed: "I know no one who has embraced a love ethic whose life has not become joyous and more fulfilling. The widespread assumption that ethical behavior takes the fun out of life is false."[5]

Still, after several grueling surgeries, skin grafts, and months of rehab, Eyob was diagnosed with brain cancer. Despite the doctors' best efforts, his cancer could not be treated. We helped Eyob return to his family in the countryside, and he died in early 2011 at age fourteen.[6]

I will never understand why Eyob, so gentle and full of love, had to endure such horrific suffering throughout his short life. But what drills into me is that Eyob's suffering and death were preventable. Far more than cancer, othering killed Eyob. He was born into one of the most Christianized areas in his country, abounding with churches and evangelism. And yet, othered as he was, no one stopped and helped him for over a decade.

Was Eyob seen as cursed by God? Was he seen as less than human? Was he simply *not seen* as a neighbor and thus ignored as an unfortunate obstacle?

I don't have answers to these questions. But they haunt me to this day. Eyob reminds me of W. H. Auden's poem about another dying boy, in which everyone goes about their daily activities untroubled and "everything turns away quite leisurely from the disaster."[7]

I am left asking how it is possible for us—Christians, humans, whoever we may be—to "turn away quite leisurely" from the suffering of a child like Eyob. How could we leave him to die alone in the streets? Othering and its normalization in our everyday awareness and religiosity is certainly a crucial part of the answer.

---

[5]bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 88.

[6]See Andrew DeCort, *Bonhoeffer's New Beginning: Ethics After Devastation* (Lanham, MD: Fortress Academic, 2018), 7-8.

[7]W. H. Auden, "Musée des Beaux Arts," December 1938, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/159364/musee-des-beaux-arts-63a1efde036cd.

○ ○ ○

In 1859, John Stuart Mill noted in *On Liberty* that our most important moral convictions easily become "dead beliefs" and fall into what he calls "the deep slumber of a decided opinion." Because we agree with them, we don't feel the need to understand or act on them. We simply check the box.[8]

Mill mentions how Christians can affirm that loving our neighbors is the revealed will of God in Holy Scripture. But rather than embracing this as "a living truth," we endorse it as a "dead dogma." Mill insists that unless our deepest convictions are "fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed," we will affirm them as beliefs but forget what they actually mean and fail to practice them. They will become a "shell and husk . . . outside the mind, incrusting and petrifying it."[9]

Is that what happened in Eyob's Christian community? Had neighbor love become a "dead dogma" for them? Had they fallen into "the deep slumber of a decided opinion," which allowed them to remain indifferent to his suffering with "incrusted minds"? Or had the vision of neighbor love simply never taken root in their community, letting othering go unchallenged?

○ ○ ○

When I graduated from my PhD program at the University of Chicago, I had Eyob's picture over my heart under my doctoral robes. A few months later in 2016, Lily and I returned to Ethiopia, and I started working as a professor of Christian ethics with Eyob in my heart. During this time, a local organization named Hope for the Fatherless invited me to speak to their community about Jesus' vision of neighbor love.

After the session ended, Hope's director, Belay, kindly offered to drive me to my next appointment. But as we crossed Addis, we heard a child wailing on the side of the road. Belay immediately pulled his car over, got out, and went to her.[10]

---

[8]See Bob Goff, *Everybody Always: Becoming Love in a World Full of Setbacks and Difficult People* (Nashville: Nelson, 2018), 6: "I can't think of a single time [Jesus] gathered His friends around Him and said, 'Guys, I just want you to agree with Me.' He wants us to do what He said, and He said He wants us to love everybody, always."

[9]John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New York: Penguin, 1974), 96-97, 101-14.

[10]I tell this story with Belay's written permission.

I was struck by the fact that this little girl was sitting directly in front of one of the largest churches in Addis Ababa. Hundreds of Christians were streaming in and out of the church. But no one stopped to help this weeping child. It seems that normalized othering had made her invisible and inaudible.

But Belay heard her voice from his car as he drove by. He pulled over and rushed to see what she needed. Belay wasn't a member of the church or its denomination. But as an orphan himself, he saw these "others" as his *neighbors*—as intimately connected to him and fully worthy of love.

When he got back to the car, Belay had the little girl with him. He said to me, "Andrew, I need to practice what you preached." He asked me to give her my seat, and he took her to the hospital. It turns out that she had an open head wound like Eyob did. Thankfully, the doctor was able to treat her wound, and a follow-up appointment was scheduled to make sure she healed properly.

This little girl's life was saved, but why? Because a complete stranger heard her cry as the cry of his neighbor. So, while hundreds of other Christians streamed in and out of church as if she didn't exist, he pulled over and helped her.

This experience shook me. If Eyob had a Belay, he would still be alive today like that little girl. Rather than a tragic memory, Eyob could be serving as a pastor and professor of hope for Ethiopia. Neighbor love would have helped him heal, and he would be helping others heal. But Eyob's Belay came too late.

This is why I've written this book: to revive the dead dogma of neighbor love and to reawaken us to the living truth that it was since the beginning—a radical vision and practice of being human for our "age of othering."[11] Like Mill urged, I aim to discuss it fully and fearlessly.

Near and far, othering is escalating and increasingly normalized in our world today. From the highest positions of power, we hear public officials mobilizing their power by describing whole groups of others as unrelated and less than ourselves, indeed, as animals who are less than human. I don't believe it is coincidental that we're also witnessing the highest number of conflict-related deaths since the 1994 Rwandan genocide. As john powell and David Menendian

[11]See Kim Samuel, "How to Reverse the Psychology of Othering," *Psychology Today*, May 11, 2023, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-power-of-belonging/202305/how-to-reverse-the-psychology-of-othering.

write, "the problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of 'othering.' . . . We currently inhabit a world that is nominally dictated by othering."[12]

The horrifying explosion of violence in Rwanda was made possible by labeling others as cockroaches. Othering is always the gateway to genocide. Sadly, much of the violent death in recent years has taken place in Ethiopia's ongoing civil war, which began in 2020. Ethnic, religious, and political others have been labeled as "enemies," "hyenas," "cancers," and "demons."[13] Predictably, this othering opened the door to genocidal violence and made the suffering of others "ungrievable" or even seen as an "existential necessity."[14] In the process, an estimated 1.2 million of our Ethiopian neighbors have been killed—1.5 times as many victims as the Rwandan genocide, after the world said "never again."[15]

Neighbor love was a revolutionary movement in ancient culture. As we'll see, it changed the way people saw one another across race, ethnicity, class, gender, age, physical ability, politics, and religion. It challenged societies to disestablish othering and restructure themselves around compassion, hospitality, generosity, and justice. It also redefined what it means to have an authentic relationship with the Creator of the universe—indeed, who our Creator actually is and what our Creator desires for our world. Jesus called neighbor love "the greatest commandment," the summary of God's will. He said it's the key to unlocking sacred Scripture and the heart of what it means to be truly human and live forever. Jesus promised, "Do this"—love the othered neighbor—"and you will flourish" (Lk 10:28, my translation). Two thousand years later, Jim Wallis calls neighbor love "still the most transformational social ethic the world has ever seen."[16] As bell hooks observes, "All the great movements for social justice in our society have strongly emphasized a love ethic."[17]

I believe neighbor love remains a revolutionary way of becoming human together still today. By *revolutionary*, I mean what Audre Lorde called "the

[12]john powell and David Menendian, *Belonging without Othering*, 3, 260.

[13]See Andrew DeCort, "Christian Nationalism Is Tearing Ethiopia Apart," *Foreign Policy*, June 17, 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/18/ethiopia-pentecostal-evangelical-abiy-ahmed-christian-nationalism/.

[14]See Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009); Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004).

[15]See Andrew DeCort, "A Gospel of Violence," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 16, 2024, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/a-gospel-of-violence/.

[16]Jim Wallis, *The (Un)Common Good: How the Gospel Brings Hope to a World Divided* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2014), xii.

[17]hooks, *All About Love*, xix.

energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama."[18] Infinitely more than a dead dogma, neighbor love is an ancient-yet-still-emerging story that can change our lives and heal our world. When Jesus called us to love our neighbors as ourselves, he promised that doing this would transform how we see one another, how we design our societies, and how we relate to the Source and Sustainer of our universe. Neighbor love is key to overcoming our separation, healing our suffering, and energizing human flourishing with authentic faith. Its movement offers the abolition of othering and a mandate worth championing with everything we have.

And still, neighbor love has been scandalously neglected. In 1973, the Peruvian liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez wrote, "A theology of the neighbor . . . has yet to be worked out."[19] Fifteen years later and with a sense of bafflement, Christian ethicist Garth Hallett noted, "Strange as this assertion may sound after nearly two millennia of Christian emphasis on agape [love], the Christian norm of neighbor-love offers relatively virgin territory for inquiry."[20] To my knowledge, this remains unchanged still today.

Like Mill's insight into neighbor love as a "dead dogma" slumbering in "incrusted minds," Ludwig Wittgenstein, a twentieth-century Austrian philosopher, helps us understand how this happened: "The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. . . . And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful."[21]

And so, I ask: Where did this simple and familiar yet most important and powerful vision of neighbor love emerge? How has it evolved across time, space, and human culture? And how can we practice it today as our way of life in our "age of othering"?

Most resources addressing these questions offer superficial piety or inaccessible scholarship without the pathos and urgency of the mandate that Eyob embodied outside Mexico Square. I'm not aware of another book that

[18]Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (London: Penguin, 2018), 15.

[19]Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 203.

[20]Garth Hallett, *Christian Neighbor-Love: An Assessment of Six Rival Versions* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1989), vii.

[21]Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), §129.

attempts to trace the neighbor-love movement from its ancient origins to our modern world. I offer this book in hopes that it can help revive and expand this healing movement for our time.[22]

The Question of Neighbor Love in an Age of Othering

On June 2, 1944, dissident pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer penned a letter from his Nazi prison cell. Bonhoeffer had been jailed for his work resisting Hitler's Holocaust against the Jews, one of the most atrocious weaponizations of othering in human history. In that letter, Bonhoeffer writes, "The most important question for the future is how we are going to find a basis for living together with other people, what spiritual realities and rules we honor as the foundations for a meaningful human life."[23]

Bonhoeffer's "most important question for the future" amid Nazi genocide alerts us to the stakes of othering and neighbor love: *How are we going to find a basis for living together with other people?* How should we see others? How should we value others? How should we treat others? On this basis, how should we understand and organize our life together in our world in the face of the othering that destroys us?

Our entire lives are woven together with others from before birth until death and beyond. As Aristotle said, we are social animals. Our greatest joys and saddest sorrows, our highest hopes and worst fears, are bound together with others. From being born and named, to learning language and how to walk, to our growth and sexuality, to creating our own families and careers, to aging and being buried, our lives are unimaginable and meaningless

[22]Recent scholars who have done seminal work on the ethics of neighbor love include, among others, Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros: A Study of the Christian Idea of Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956); Gene Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972); Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); Hallett, *Christian Neighbor-Love*; Timothy Jackson, *Love Disconsoled: Meditations on Christian Charity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Werner Jeanrond, *A Theology of Love* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010); Timothy Jackson, *Political Agape: Christian Love and Liberal Democracy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015); Marcus Mescher, *The Ethics of Encounter: Christian Neighbor Love as a Practice of Solidarity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020). See also Edmund Santurri, ed., *The Love Commandments: Essays in Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009); Frederick Simmons and Brian Sorrels, eds., *Love and Christian Ethics: Tradition, Theory, and Society* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016); and Kelly James Clark, Aziz Abu Sarah, and Nancy Fuchs, *Strangers, Neighbors, Friends: Muslim-Christian-Jewish Reflections on Compassion and Peace* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018).

[23]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Letter to Hans-Walter Schleicher on June 2, 1944," in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John de Gruchy, trans. Christian Gremmels et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 409.

without others. Our most mundane activities, such as walking down the street, shopping for groceries, and scrolling online, are surrounded by others.

Bonhoeffer's question is essential because we have a choice in how we answer it. A pack of wolves doesn't gather in the forest and discuss whether they will have mercy on neighboring lambs or devour them. They follow their instinct and hunt for prey. But human beings can stop and think. We can ask ourselves these fundamental questions: How should we see others? How should we value others? How should we treat others? How can we find a basis for living together with other people—with our neighbors near and far?

How we answer these questions determines how we spend our attention, time, energy, money, passion, and vocation. And what we do with these gifts reveals who we really are, what we truly love, and what we think the ultimate meaning of life is. Our answers to these questions become our identity and destiny.

Amid our age of othering, I agree with Bonhoeffer: how we see and relate with other people is the most important question for our present and future. Bonhoeffer's question is another way of asking that ancient question, "Who is my neighbor?"

The Ethics of Neighbor Love to Abolish Othering

At heart, the question, "Who is my neighbor?" interrogates the scope of our moral community. It asks, Who is related to us, and who is other? Who am I obligated to care for, and who can I overlook, exclude, or even attack without regret? All human beings have an inherent sense of moral right and responsibility—to tell the truth, to protect others, to share and serve. But the question is, Who counts as morally significant, and who falls off our radar?

Think of morality as a circle. Those inside the circle are people we recognize, respect, and want to see flourish, or at least to treat fairly and do justice to. Others outside the circle are those we consciously or unconsciously ignore, exclude, or attack. The question is how we draw this circle and thus who is in, who is out, and why. *Who is our neighbor?*

This question searches to the heart of Hebrew Scripture and its ethical vision for humanity. On the one hand, the Hebrew Bible or Christian Old Testament affirms that all people have been created by God, bear God's holy image, and descend as one family from shared ancestors. In this way, the

Hebrew Bible presents us with a universal moral vision in which there are no "others." This was a revolutionary breakthrough in ancient morality. Building on this vision, God's promise to Abraham was ultimately to bless "all peoples on earth" (Gen 12:3), and Moses commanded his community, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18). The circle seems to surround everyone—as wide as the world.

But on the other hand, Israel was one nation among many others, surrounded by people it saw as enemies, and sometimes in danger for its survival. For Israel, *neighbor* generally meant a fellow Israelite and worshiper of Israel's God, thus potentially limiting the scope of its moral community. Israelites were called by God to be a community of love and justice for the neighbor. But Israel's qualified definition of the neighbor raises the question of just *who* counts as a neighbor.

Israel's law—the circle of its moral community—contains troubling limitations in who we're called to see as neighbors and how others should be treated in light of Israel's religious nationalism. As we wrestle with the text, we'll see that some non-Israelite neighbors could be ignored or excluded. Others could be enslaved from generation to generation. In extreme cases, whole groups of "enemies" could be hated and exterminated, including women and children.

Of course, there are places in the Old Testament that show just how groundbreaking and countercultural Israel's neighbor-love ethic truly was, especially in light of the cultures of surrounding societies. The story of Ruth and Boaz is particularly inspiring as we'll see. But Israel's ethic didn't include everyone or completely abolish othering. We'll explore this complexity in the next chapter.

But with Jesus of Nazareth, we discover a revolutionary breakthrough in culture and ethics—the radical expansion of neighbor love into a universal movement. For Jesus, the neighbor to be loved was not simply a fellow Jew or follower of Moses' law. Jesus insists the neighbor is *everyone*, including excluded outsiders and hated rivals. In fact, Jesus expands the command of neighbor love and declares for the first time in Israel's history three extraordinary words: "Love your enemies" (Mt 5:44). Indeed, in his most famous story about the meaning of neighbor love, Jesus makes his society's most hated enemy the loving neighbor who crosses every boundary of religion, ethnicity, and politics to help a suffering stranger. Jesus is provocative and

profound: the one we are most tempted to other is our neighbor. A universal belonging is unlocked.

What was so revolutionary in Jesus' teaching was that he drew the moral circle of love around everyone. Now no one was left outside. Othering was abolished. For Jesus, it didn't matter whether you were a fellow citizen or foreigner, righteous or sinner, friend or enemy, man or woman, rich or poor, child or adult—all people were valued as precious neighbors. And thus all others were to be treated as *neighbors* with respect, compassion, and self-giving love.

In fact, Jesus seems to make loving our enemies a condition for enjoying an authentic relationship with God (Mt 5:45; Lk 6:35). This is the paradox of his teaching of neighbor love: we exclude ourselves from full belonging only when we exclude others from it. For Jesus, God is a neighbor lover without limits, and thus to fully participate in the life of God's family, we too must be neighbor lovers without limits. Jesus' teachings were as challenging as they were inspiring, and love for the enemy became their signature. We'll explore them in chapter three.

In the following chapters, I'll argue that the practitioners of Jesus' movement not only preserved his teaching of neighbor love; they expanded and intensified it in their world and across the earth. They hand it off to us today and invite us to continue it in the face of othering.

Having said that, I want to name immediately that Christianity does not have a monopoly on neighbor love, nor an exceptional history of practicing it. My Christian tradition has also often seen itself as separated from or superior to its neighbors. We've fallen into othering again and again. As this book's story unfolds, we'll see examples of famous Christians, such as Martin Luther, who labeled others as subhuman "enemies," which contributed to the atrocious othering of the Holocaust. Sadly, some of the gravest examples of othering in history—from America's genocidal founding and institutionalized slavery to the German Holocaust, Rwandan genocide, and Ethiopia's civil war—have been perpetrated by overwhelmingly Christian populations.[24]

This is perhaps the greatest irony of othering: it leads us to claim a superior identity to others, and yet it justifies some of the most appalling behavior imaginable. Another irony of othering is that we can reinscribe it in the very process of claiming to have overcome it, as if "we" are exceptionally

[24]I'm grateful to an anonymous reviewer of this book who encouraged me to underscore this important point.

moral and fundamentally different from "them." James Baldwin was right: "None of us are that different from one another, neither that much better nor that much worse."[25] In a sense, then, othering presents a third irony: recognizing it can unite us and remind us of our shared humanity. Just like no one has a monopoly on neighbor love, no one has a monopoly on othering. Neighbor love includes all of us and can be practiced by all of us. As Baldwin wrote, "Our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult—that is, to accept it."[26] Othering is our only true enemy.

I write this book as a Christian ethicist deeply inspired by the life, teaching, and practice of Jesus. The movement he started is the one I know most thoroughly, and I believe it universalized the moral circle of our humanity in extremely important, innovative ways. But I hope this book speaks to neighbors who are not Christian or are even deeply suspicious of Christianity. Most fundamentally, neighbor love is an ethic of cooperation rather than competition, of solidarity rather than supremacy. As a student of ethics, I hold deep reverence for the sacred wisdom and healing power of neighbor love in Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and other religious and secular traditions. I'll return to this at the end of this book and hope to explore neighbor love in these traditions more thoroughly in the future.

For now, this mindfulness of othering's ironies takes me back to Bonhoeffer's question: "How can we find a basis for living together with other people?" Jesus and the best parts of the movement he inherited and inspired answer that neighbor love is this divine basis. It's a movement that flows from and returns to the very heart of God in our primal origins, exceeding and including all of our finite humanity. All people have been created by God. All people are loved by God. And thus all people are our neighbors, morally significant presences whom we are connected to and called to care for as equally precious to ourselves—including our enemy-neighbors, Eyobs, and the earth itself.

From this perspective, I believe that neighbor love is the most important mandate for Christian ethics and our shared moral responsibility, now and

[25]James Baldwin, *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 747.

[26]Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, 18. In *The Origin of Others*, Toni Morrison identifies three motivators behind why we other people: (1) to gain power (p. 3), (2) to define our identity (pp. 5-6), and (3) to build our sense of belonging (pp. 15-16). As we'll see, neighbor love offers powerful, healing alternatives to each of othering's addictive motivators.

always. We don't live in a world of family, friends, strangers, and enemies. Every person we see and meet—young and old, rich and poor, White and Black, male and female, straight and gay, familiar and foreign, strong and weak, friend and foe, and all who don't fit into these simplistic binaries—*every* person is our neighbor. They are someone to whom we owe our moral responsibility and can share the divine gift of life. In the beginning and in the end, we don't live in a world of war torn between some *us* and an othered *them* struggling for domination. In the beginning and in the end, we live in God's one world, a universal moral community where everyone is a neighbor and no one is to be ignored, excluded, or attacked. From the start, this ethical vision calls us to open our eyes and come home to one another—in all of the beauty, complexity, and agony of being human together in our world. We are *we*.

The circle of neighbor love is as wide as the world, surrounds us all, and opens us to a universal belonging.

The Crisis of Othering in Ancient Mythology

The biblical mandate to see everybody as our neighbor was a revolutionary vision that expanded the scope of who we owe our love. But today, many of us grew up hearing "love your neighbor" as a dead doctrine with a nominal sense that a neighbor could be anyone. In our "incrusted minds," my brief summary of Jesus' vision of neighbor love, as Mill suggested, may not strike us as a revolutionary breakthrough that changed the world forever and offers us our best hope for healing our world.

But I believe that it was and is exactly that: a revolutionary moral breakthrough and a vision that can heal our world. Jesus' vision of neighbor love was a radical innovation in the ancient world and remains countercultural to this day. We can appreciate this by looking back at some of the oldest stories, philosophies, and cultural systems that have shaped our world.

In the ancient Near East's oldest and most influential storytelling about the meaning of life, we find that it was saturated with othering, and the neighbor simply didn't exist. Human imagination was dominated with hierarchy, conflict, exclusion, and violence.

For example, Enuma Elish was one of the most widespread creation stories in ancient Mesopotamia, dating back nearly five thousand years by some estimates. In it, the young god Marduk makes war on the older goddess

Tiamat. Out of his brutal act of killing her, the world is created and the moral law established. Marduk makes the earth from Tiamat's corpse and the waters from her blood. After having successfully destroyed his enemy, Marduk sets himself up as the divine king who appoints human kings to defend his religion, produce wealth through slave labor, and destroy their enemies. In fact, humans are made from another murdered god for the purpose of serving as the gods' worshipful inferiors.[27]

This mythical story imagines othering and violence as woven into the very fabric of worldly reality and human life from the beginning. Our soil, water, social order, and embodied selves are literally founded on murder—the stronger killing the weaker and setting up a system of domination over others. The moral circle is a crime scene, and only those with the power to wage violence have any place within it. The others should be conquered, enslaved, or exterminated.[28]

We find a strikingly similar culture-making story in ancient Greece with Hesiod's *Theogony.* This is a creation myth from around 700 BC that tells the prehistory of the gods and the origins of the world.[29] In *Theogony*, Father

[27]See Enuma Elish translated in Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis: The Story of Creation*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), especially 42 (the murder of Tiamat and the creation of the world) and 46-47 (the murder of Kingu and the creation of humanity).

[28]Note powell and Menendian, *Belonging Without Othering*, 280-81: "Law plays a critical role in the othering process. Ancient legal codes are replete with legal distinctions based on identity and reflect both the othering processes of the societies in which they emerge as well as contribute to ongoing othering. . . . The Code of Hammurabi [c. 1755 BC], perhaps the earliest known legal code, divides society into two genders and three classes, superiors, commoners, and slaves or servants, and ascribes different punishments depending upon the identity of a perpetrator of a crime or the victim." This is not to say that the ancient Near East did not have laws and wisdom against injustice, especially for the poor and oppressed. For example, in "The Agreement Between Ir-Addu and Niqmepa," dating to the Middle Babylonian period (1595–1155 BC), these two kings agree, "[If people of my land] enter your land to preserve themselves from starvation, you must protect them and you must feed them like (citizens of) your land" (lines 55-56). Quoted in William Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, eds., *Contexts of Scripture*, vol. 2, *Monumental Inscriptions from the Ancient World* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 330. I'm grateful to Daniel Master for this reference. The Babylonian wisdom poem known as "The Ballad of Early Rulers" (ca. 1500–1200 BC), emphasizing the unpredictability of fate, says, "One should not speak in disrespect of others. One should not treat the weak contemptuously. The cripple may overtake the runner. The rich may beg the poor. This is the fate of the sound person. [The fates] are determined by Ea. [The lots are drawn] according to the will of the god" (lines 25-43). Quoted in Yoram Cohen, *Wisdom from the Late Bronze Age* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 137. I'm grateful to John Walton for pointing me to this text. However, Walton wrote in an email to me on April 5, 2019, that he is aware of "no comparisons between loving others and loving self" in ancient Near Eastern literature. Othering is pervasive and dominant.

[29]See Hesiod, *Theogony, Works and Days. Testimonia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), lines 126-206.

Heaven hates his children, and Mother Earth wants to take revenge against her violent husband, but she is afraid. So while Heaven is having sex with Earth, his son Chronos (Time) cuts his father into pieces with a machete from his mother. Time's son Zeus then becomes the supreme god who "mightily reigns and rules." The blood of Heaven falls on Earth, and thus begins the violent process of creation.[30] As the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus wrote, "War is the father of all and the king of all; and some he has made gods and some men, some slave and some free."[31]

Like all world-making stories, this myth had utterly profound effects on the human imagination. It inscribed othering into its hearers' most basic worldview. Where do we come from? How should we live together? What is the purpose of life? According to *Theogony*, a son murdered his father and chopped his body into pieces, and his blood is where it all begins. Violence is our father and war our king. Some are made to be free and others to be slaves, and only the strong survive this fate.

Whether we look to ancient Mesopotamia, ancient Greece, or elsewhere, again and again humanity's earliest storytelling is animated with othering and filled with violence.[32] The moral circle inscribed people in an antagonistic and often murderous relationship in which others were seen as unrelated or less than one's own community. Human life was depicted like a crime scene, surging with fear, hatred, anger, lust, conflict, and killing. And this was presented as our normal, even normative reality. There was no neighbor or moral neighborhood. There were gods and men, kings and slaves, us and them in a depressing struggle for survival. Othering is always ironic.

The Crisis of Othering in Classical Philosophy

We might assume that ancient mythology was primitive and barbaric—alas, terms often used to other our ancient neighbors. Perhaps classical philosophy

[30] *Theogony*, lines 405, 200-205.

[31] Fragment B53 in Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 9.9.4, quoted in Bruno Snell, *Heraklit: Fragmente* (Munich: Heimeran, 1976). See also fragment 67 in Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 9.10.8. War has been a powerful source of othering meaning-making throughout human history. See Chris Hedges, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014).

[32] See Robin W. Lovin and Frank E. Reynolds, eds., *Cosmogony and Ethical Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985). In *Caste*, 101-2, Isabel Wilkerson analyzes India's ancient Hindu text, Manu, in which the creation process established "the Laws of all the social classes" and thus provided a primordial justification for India's caste system. In this system, even the shadow of a subordinated "untouchable" was seen as "a pollutant."

laid the foundations for an enlightened morality of human dignity, justice, and peace? But this is also myth.

Plato lived around 429–347 BC in ancient Greece. Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead famously wrote that European philosophy was simply "a series of footnotes" on Plato and his thought.[33] Plato's *Republic* is one of his most influential works—a lengthy dialogue on the nature of justice and how to create a flourishing society. His *Republic* raises many brilliant questions about the possibilities and limits of justice. It is a work foundational to political theory, aesthetics, and ethics from which we still have much to learn. But even as it critiques Greece's myths, it too explicitly inscribes othering and offers a very limited, exclusive moral circle of human responsibility.

For example, Plato believed that a just society should be hierarchically ranked into a caste system. Philosopher-kings are the golden class that rule on top, warriors are the silver class that keep order in the middle, and farmers and craftsmen are the iron and bronze who labor at the bottom.[34] Plato was, in effect, a philosopher of eugenics: he believed that only "equals" should mate and mix, and that children should be separated by caste in order to grow up untainted by others.[35] The precious rulers and warriors should never mingle with the lowly laborers beneath them.

In fact, Plato argued that the "bottom" classes shouldn't receive any education. He thought it would be a waste of the public's resources and dangerous to treat these people as if they could learn. A committee of experts should carefully observe and examine each child to determine its true "nature." (We'll often notice how othering is essentialized or justified by claiming that some have one "nature" while others have different "natures" that are, again, unrelated or less.) Once sorted, children should be assigned to their caste for the rest of their lives—with no court of appeal. In this way, Plato's republic was governed by a eugenically engineered caste system. What we call agency, opportunity, and upward mobility were dangerous and intolerable to Plato. Unsurprisingly, Plato justifies this othering order by calling it the will of "God." (We'll also need to pay attention to how "God" is often invoked as the ultimate architect and emperor of othering.[36])

---

[33]Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 39.

[34]Plato, *The Republic*, 2nd ed., trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 415a.

[35]Plato, *Republic* 459e.

[36]Wilkerson, *Caste*, 101-4, argues that claims to "divine will and the laws of nature" are the primary pillar of caste or institutionalized systems of othering.

But Plato's city was even more brutal. For example, Plato argues that the extremely sick, weak, and disabled—people like Eyob—are not worth living. The city's doctors should leave them to die or actively eliminate them. Plato writes, "And those of the worse, and any of the others born deformed, they will hide away in unspeakable and unseen places." Why? Again, Plato believes that the weak and sick waste the resources of the city and drag it down. Indeed, they risk polluting the "purity" of the golden rulers and silver warriors, so they must either be isolated or eliminated.[37] (Purity will be another powerful notion in othering's story.) Plato's policies of breeding, casting, and killing in order to protect elite purity chillingly anticipate policies used in American slavery, Nazi Germany, and other modern cases of institutionalized othering and genocide.

Finally, Plato advocates for violently xenophobic foreign policy. For example, Plato insists that Greeks and non-Greeks are completely "foreign and alien" to one another. They are, he argues, "enemies by nature, and this hatred must be called war." Thus, Plato encourages Greeks to hate "barbarians" and to burn down their houses, destroy their fields, and kill their men, women, and children. Unsurprisingly, then, Plato thinks slavery is "just," and he insists that Greeks should use foreigners only as slaves in order to "spare the Greek stock," which he sees as "entirely superior."[38] Othering is essential to Plato's philosophy.

When we examine it honestly, it's hard to see Plato's philosophy as much more civilized than ancient mythology. Plato advocates for eugenic breeding, a rigid caste system, violence against the weak and sick, and explicit othering, war, and slavery against non-Greeks. Plato's republic draws a very narrow circle indeed that excludes and kills many. In short, his republic has no neighbors—only fellow caste members, superiors and inferiors, and foreign enemies united by a sense of racial superiority willed by the gods. From this perspective, it's disturbing to think of European philosophy as "a series of footnotes" on Plato's philosophy. No wonder so much Western philosophy went on to fuel othering with its racism, colonialism, and genocide.[39]

---

[37]Plato, *Republic* 410a, 460c. Note powell and Menendian, *Belonging Without Othering*, 280-81: "One of the earliest known written legal codes, the Roman Republic's 'Twelve Tables' [c. 450 BC], required newborns with visible disabilities to be put to immediate death." In *Caste*, 115-30, Isabel Wilkerson analyzes "purity versus pollution" as a core "pillar" of caste systems.

[38]Plato, *Republic* 470c-d, 469b-c.

[39]powell and Menendian, *Belonging Without Othering*, 180-82, trace a similar pattern in the philosophy of John Locke and other Enlightenment thinkers.

Consider another classical philosopher, Aristotle, who lived around 384–322 BC. He was Plato's most famous student and the teacher of Alexander the Great. Aristotle's philosophy broke away from Plato's in important ways, but their values fundamentally overlap.

In the first part of his book on *Politics*, Aristotle famously argues that slavery is "natural" and thus *normal*. According to Aristotle, a slave is a naturally inferior, talking tool who belongs to his naturally superior, rational master as a piece of property.[40] (Notice again how nature is used as a justification for othering.) With this othering vision, Aristotle obviously didn't oppose Alexander the Great's massive campaigns to dominate and enslave others. Aristotle's argument that slavery is "natural" and right had devastating consequences in his society and throughout history.

Aristotle also dehumanizes women, children, and manual laborers. He calls women "misbegotten males"—basically men without penises who are inherently passive, weak, and less rational. About laborers, Aristotle writes that if you aren't an independently wealthy Greek man with enslaved people doing your work, you have no chance of living a truly good and worthwhile life.[41] He summarizes his position like this: "There are by nature various classes of rulers and ruled. For the free rules the slave, the male rules the female, and the man rules the child . . . for the slave doesn't have the rational part at all, and the female has it but without full authority, while the child has it but in an undeveloped form."[42]

Like Plato, then, Aristotle gives us an inherently hierarchical, othering vision of society. But unlike Plato, Aristotle's society is exclusively dominated by rich men who rule over slaves, women, and children as their masters—unprotected by law and without any say in making the law. Still like Plato, Aristotle's philosophy naturalizes inequality and has no place for liberating agency, opportunity, and upward mobility. Despite Aristotle's important differences from Plato, his moral circle is also narrow, exclusive, and oppressive.

Notice again that Aristotle's city has no neighbors. Instead, it has superiors, inferiors, and foreign enemies. Those are the basic options. Desmond

[40]Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Harris Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), 1252a30.
[41]Aristotle, *Politics* 1278a15, 1273a30.
[42]Aristotle, *Politics* 1260a, 1275a25.

Tutu, the South African archbishop who struggled against apartheid, summarizes Aristotle's position as "irrational and immoral," justifying "cruelty with impunity."[43]

Looking at these founders of Western philosophy, it's hard to argue that it was much more enlightened and civilized than ancient mythology. Instead, it presents sophisticated arguments to justify devaluing, excluding, enslaving, and slaughtering certain groups of people. Classical philosophy is especially cruel to children, women, disabled people, workers, and foreigners. Nowhere do we find a vision of God creating all people to be treated equally as neighbors who are worthy of love. Human imagination remained trapped in othering's story of hierarchy, hatred, and hegemony. The neighbor-love mandate was virtually unknown, and othering governed an exclusive (im)moral circle.

The Crisis of Othering in Greco-Roman Culture

Unsurprisingly, then, Oxford historian Larry Siedentop argues that "natural inequality" was the fundamental structure of Greco-Roman culture. He writes, "At the core of ancient thinking [was] the assumption of natural inequality. Whether in the domestic sphere, in public life or when contemplating the cosmos, Greeks and Romans did not see anything like a level playing field. Rather, they instinctively saw a hierarchy or pyramid." This culture had no vision of a fully "common humanity" called to love others as neighbors. Reality was divided into a hierarchy of families, strangers, and enemies. Siedentop argues that Greco-Roman culture thus had no concept of "charity" or loving others beyond the boundaries of one's group simply for their well-being.[44]

American historian Carter Lindberg corroborates Siedentop's picture. He writes, "[The Greco-Roman] understanding of love did not envision love beyond one's own circle or status for the wellbeing of others." Lindberg quotes from Roman dramatist Plautus, who lived two hundred years before Jesus: "A man is a wolf to a man whom he does not know. . . . What is given to the poor is lost." Plautus's perspective makes toxic sense within the framework of othering: Why give to the poor if they have no value? Lindberg shows that

[43]Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 92.
[44]Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (London: Penguin, 2015), 51, 13, 15.

Greeks and Romans "shared a general disdain" for "women, the weak, and the marginalized."[45] Wealthy elites who gave to those "beneath" them did so to build loyalty, secure social stability for their ambitions, and immortalize their names with plaques and temples in their honor. They didn't give because they saw others as connected to themselves and equal in value.

Like Plautus, famous Roman philosopher Cicero called the poor "the scum of the city" and thought they should be washed away. Faithful to Plato and Aristotle, Cicero saw the rich and powerful as virtuous, while he viewed the poor and weak as valueless or even evil. Lindberg summarizes, "There is little evidence of pity or compassion in ancient culture. In the ancient world, one gave in order to get. . . . The reigning ideology was that the gods love the wealthy."[46]

Siedentop argues that classical culture was dominated by the idea of "natural inequality." Lindberg calls classical culture "a world without love." In many ways, ancient culture reflected the basic principles that early evolutionary scientists claimed drive natural selection: kinship, competition, conquest, and killing.[47]

Whether we look at ancient mythology, classical philosophy, or the popular culture that emerged with them, the moral circle was consistently drawn around "us" alone and fueled the oppression, exclusion, enslavement, and killing of "others." This wasn't by accident: the reigning imaginations and ideologies naturalized, institutionalized, and defended othering as the will of "God." In these paradigms, the world is created and organized by othering. The divine favors the domination of one group over another. And the others—women, children, workers, the sick, the weak, the poor, the foreign, the enslaved—must simply accept their lot in life or die. In this small world, Eyob doesn't deserve to live.

Surveying these traditions, at least, we find that the non-Jewish world before Jesus had no moral vision of the neighbor and certainly no universal ethic that commanded loving others as ourselves across othering's

[45]Carter Lindberg, *Love: A Brief History Through Western Christianity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 36-37.

[46]Lindberg, *Love*, 38, 40.

[47]For seeds of opposition to violence in Greek culture, see William Klassen, *Love of Enemies: The Way to Peace* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 12-23. For a much more expansive vision of human evolution, see Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

normalized boundaries. Even the cosmopolitan Stoics who prided themselves on being "citizens of the world" defined humanity in terms of reason and judged others as less rational and thus less human—less connected and less worthy of care.[48] Again, othering is ironic: it claims superiority and reinscribes our sadness.

When we look at the evidence, Jesus' teaching of neighbor love was in fact a revolutionary breakthrough. He was challenging established religious orthodoxies and entrenched cultural systems of othering. No wonder he himself was almost immediately othered and labeled a Samaritan, friend of sinners, and demon-possessed. When we love the other, we often become the other. Jesus named the cost of this love directly in his Sermon on the Mount, the manifesto he gave at the beginning of his public movement:

> Blessed are the persecuted for the sake of justice, because theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be happy, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.[49] (Mt 5:10-12, my translation)

For Jesus, when we exit the closed circle of othering and enter into a new path opened with compassion, peacemaking, and justice, our humanity becomes prophetic. We turn the lights on in reality and help preserve one another's humanity. We enter into a universal blessing (see Mt 5:1-16).

But Jesus was honest: the guardians of power rarely take kindly to this divergent way of becoming humanely happy and often do everything they can to crush it.

Our Crisis of Othering Today

The crisis of othering is not a thing of the past, and Jesus' vision of neighbor love remains just as prophetic today as it was in his world. Our deep habits of ignoring, excluding, and oppressing others continue to haunt us. A few examples illustrate this sobering reality and the stakes of this book in our age of othering.

---

[48]See Martha Nussbaum, *The Cosmopolitan Tradition: A Noble but Flawed Ideal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019); Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Allen Lane, 2006).

[49]I interpret Jesus' Beatitudes in the context of othering in my book *Blessed Are the Others: Jesus' Way in a Violent World* (Washington, DC: BitterSweet Collective, 2024).

Philosopher Jonathan Glover estimates that war killed eighty-six million people from 1900 to 1989. On average, that means that war ended a neighbor's life almost every fifteen seconds of every minute of every hour for ninety years.[50] As I write today, the world is witnessing more conflict-related deaths than at any time since the Rwandan genocide in 1994. This catastrophic violence is often fueled by patterns of othering in which people are seen as insects, animals, aliens, or demons rather than as neighbors and fellow humans. Violence is sold as an existential necessity for our survival.[51]

Othering, then, doesn't simply kill people. It also makes our neighbors run for their lives. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, there are over 122 million people in our world today who have been violently forced to flee from their homes. This means that we are living in perhaps the largest refugee crisis in history. Over fifteen million refugees are under the age of eighteen—enough young neighbors to fill up New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago combined. The United Nations estimates that one person is violently displaced every two seconds in the world today.[52] Of course, the reasons for our refugee crises are many: ethnic cleansing, economic disenfranchisement, neocolonialism—just to name a few. But their roots are similar: seeing others as unrelated or less than ourselves and thus justifying their suffering or remaining indifferent to it.[53]

The depredations of othering also occur at home and in intimate relationships. According to the United Nations Agency for Women, 35 percent of women experience physical or sexual violence at some point in their lives.[54]

---

[50]Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 47.

[51]See Sam Keen, *Faces of the Enemy: Reflections of the Hostile Imagination* (New York: Harper & Row, 1991); Smith, *Less Than Human*; Smith, *On Inhumanity*.

[52]Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, "UNHCR Mid-Year Trends 2024," United Nations Refugee Agency, October 9, 2024, www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html.

[53]See Frances D'Emilio, "Pope: Vatican Will Shelter 2 Families Fleeing War, Hunger," Associated Press, September 6, 2015, https://apnews.com/general-news-9f9a61892ab74de693b72641b42afeb1. Pope Francis is quoted as saying, "Faced with the tragedy of tens of thousands of refugees who are fleeing death by war and by hunger, and who are on a path toward a hope for life, the Gospel calls us to be neighbors to the smallest and most abandoned, to give them concrete hope."

[54]See "Facts and Figures: Ending Violence Against Women," United Nations Agency for Women, November 24, 2024, www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures.

Other studies indicate that seven in ten women suffer abuse.[55] Looking back, the Nobel Prize–winning economist Amartya Sen estimated that around one hundred million women disappeared in the twentieth century due to infanticide, abduction, sex trafficking, and murder.[56] This means that as many women were lost as casualties of war in the twentieth century. We saw above how Aristotle's patriarchal philosophy degraded women into the private property of men. Explicitly or implicitly, many cultures today continue to see women as less valuable than men and thus less worthy of dignity, security, and agency. When women are othered into objects, violence is never far away. Indeed, gender-based othering is already a form of cultural violence against women that enables the epidemic of abuse, inequality, and violence to endure.[57]

Slavery is also not a thing of othering's barbaric past. Today the international slave trade is a $150 billion business and one of the fastest-growing enterprises in the world.[58] The International Labor Association estimates that there are forty million enslaved neighbors in our world. Twenty-five million suffer under forced labor; fifteen million suffer within forced marriages and sex slavery. Over seven out of ten of these forty million neighbors are girls and women; one in four are children.[59] Again, othering is the crucial precondition of people enslaving other people: if we didn't see "them" as unrelated or less than "us," we would never tolerate enslaving our neighbors or maintaining the impoverishing economic systems that depend on their "cheap" labor.

The crisis of othering also cuts deep within each one of us. When we come to see our own selves as unrelated or inferior to others, life is drained of meaning. We become isolated and lose the will to live. The World Health Organization estimates that more than seven hundred thousand people end

[55]See Dennis Mukwege, *The Power of Women* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2021). This book is a deeply moving account of how women are othered today and Dr. Mukwege's struggle for women's dignity in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

[56]Amartya Sen, "More Than 100 Million Women Are Missing," *New York Times Review of Books*, December 1990.

[57]For the seminal analysis of cultural, structural, and direct violence, see Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (August 1990): 291-305.

[58]The International Justice Mission regularly monitors and updates the data on modern slavery. See www.ijm.org.

[59]"Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage," International Labor Association, 2017, www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_575540.pdf.

their lives every year. Among fifteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds, suicide is the third leading cause of death.[60] Historian Yuval Harari observes that in the year after 9/11, many more people died by suicide than were killed by terrorists, soldiers, and drug dealers.[61] Contemporary culture and socioeconomic structures are mass-producing loneliness, mental illness, a sense of worthlessness, and despair. In fact, the US surgeon general declared loneliness to be a public health epidemic as deadly as smoking.[62]

Othering attacks us from without and within. At the end of this book, I'll discuss how neighbor love invites us to see not only others but also *our own selves* as beloved *neighbors*. While neighbor love challenges selfishness, it affirms self-love as vital to our flourishing. We are all neighbors, including to ourselves.

Statistics can help us see the big picture. But they can also be numbing and depersonalizing. Near and far, the consequences of seeing others as our *neighbors*—or *not*—are concrete, intimately personal, and urgent. The indifference, exclusion, and violence that othering allows cash out in the daily lives of individual people. This is why I began this book with Eyob's story and confronting my own impulse to ignore him. Even as I was grieving the acute pain of being othered by my Christian community, I initially did the same thing to him. The Persian poet Rumi insightfully observed, "Satan thought, 'I'm better than Adam,' and that *better than* is still strongly in us."[63]

A Movement That Can Heal Our World

In the face of the extreme othering that was devastating his world, Dietrich Bonhoeffer asked from his Nazi prison cell, "How are we going to find a basis for living together with other people?" His question attunes us to the stakes of neighbor love in the face of history and our tragically perennial tradition of othering—of seeing others as less than *neighbors* and thus excluding them from our moral circle of human responsibility.

---

[60]See "Suicide: Key Facts," World Health Organization, August 24, 2024, www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide.

[61]Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (London: Vintage, 2011), 411.

[62]"New Surgeon General Advisory Raises Alarm About the Devastating Impact of the Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation in the United States," US Department of Health and Human Services, May 3, 2023, www.hhs.gov/about/news/2023/05/03/new-surgeon-general-advisory-raises-alarm-about-devastating-impact-epidemic-loneliness-isolation-united-states.html.

[63]Jalal al-Din Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*, ed. Coleman Barks (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 142.

But Bonhoeffer's question also points us to the radical hope of Jesus' revolutionary movement of neighbor love: each and every person is made by God, loved by God, and thus morally connected and equally precious in value—including our "enemies." Neighbor love invites all of us into this ever-expanding moral circle that can overcome the ancient world's othering and the othering of our own today. Neighbor love was like a healing balm that worked its way through the encrusted hatred, exclusion, and oppression of human othering. It pioneered seemingly impossible pathways into a new future of shared humanity alive with dignity, compassion, justice, and hope. It remains our inestimable inheritance today.

In the eyes of neighbor love, Eyob is not simply a poor child, a suffering stranger, or even a cursed monster. Eyob is a precious neighbor whose life is worth embracing. In the ears of neighbor love, that little girl's cry outside the church is not simply a noise or annoyance. Her voice is the voice of God calling us to stop, to act, and to bring healing to our neighbor like Belay did.

How will we see others? How will we value others? How will we treat others: women, children, men, foreigners, the weak, the enslaved, enemies, ourselves—all of us others who defy any simplistic categorization? These are the questions at the heart of the human condition and this book. According to Bonhoeffer, they're the most important questions for our future.

I believe that neighbor love is the greatest treasure of Christian ethics and all of our shared moral wisdom across traditions. As we study its history, we come to see it as a global abolition movement against othering and a universal hope for all humanity. It has the power to heal our world, if only we no longer merely endorse it as a dead dogma. If we fully, frequently, and fearlessly discuss it—and then *embody* it in the *practice* of our lives—we can revive it as the living truth that it has been from the beginning.

Imagine if our eyes were healed and we no longer saw others merely as family, friends, strangers, and enemies. Imagine if our eyes could see each and every person as a precious neighbor. As C. S. Lewis argues, "There are no *ordinary* people. . . . Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses."[64]

What if we embraced this sacred vision of the other? What if—before we apply any label, any category, any "us" or "them" to anyone—we simply saw

[64]C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 15.

one another as our *neighbors*? This is a universal moral vision that draws the golden circle of belonging around everyone and excludes none. In this healing movement, all reality and the universe itself become a shared moral neighborhood energized with love, justice, and flourishing for all.

This is our humanity's shared hope in our age of othering mutilated by preference, privilege, and power. I can no longer label, overlook, or attack any other because I live in the presence of my neighbor. Life becomes transfigured and astonishing: everywhere I go, I find neighbors. There are no longer any nobodies, no longer any invisible objects or valueless enemies.

This one—a neighbor.
That one—a neighbor.
Over there—a neighbor.
Behind those walls—a neighbor.
Under that bridge—a neighbor.
Buried in the ground—a neighbor.
Across that border—a neighbor.
In the past—a neighbor.
In the future—a neighbor.
In the mirror—a neighbor.
Despite my othering—a neighbor.

Mother Teresa said, "The world has never had such a need for love as it has today."[65] I share her conviction and believe that Martin Luther King Jr. was also right: "This love might well be the salvation of our civilization. . . . Love is ultimately the only answer to mankind's problems. . . . He who has love has the key that unlocks the door to the meaning of ultimate reality."[66] Neighbor love makes humanity shimmer and shine in full color like precious diamonds as if for the first time. How was it that I went through life and couldn't see the glory all around and within me? I am born again, and neighbor love sets me free.

[65]Mother Teresa, *Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 26.
[66]Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 140, 250.

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/reviving-the-golden-rule