

STRANGERS AND SCAPEGOATS

Extending God's Welcome
to Those on the Margins

MATTHEW S. VOS

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments xi

Introduction: Strangers among Us 1

PART 1

STRANGERS AND SCAPEGOATS IN SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

1. Constructing Identity: *The Self, the Social, and the Stranger* 15
2. A Stranger World: *In-Groups, Out-Groups, and the Space Between* 32
3. No More Scapegoats: *A Stranger Theology* 48

PART 2

STRANGERS ON THE MARGINS

4. Strangers in the Pew: *Girls and Symbolic Exclusion* 71
5. From Stranger to Neighbor: *Intersex Persons and the Church* 93
by Val Hiebert, Providence University College
6. Strangers at the Borders: *Immigrants and the Heart of the Gospel Message* 109
7. Strangers behind Bars: *Examining the System of Mass Incarceration* 141
by Scott Monsma, Northwestern College
8. Competing in Cedar: *Nike, Superstar Athletes, and the Unseen Strangers Who Make Our Shoes* 167

PART 3
INVITING STRANGERS

- 9. Challenging the Normal: *The Strange(r) Reality of the Gospel* 199
- 10. Pursuing the Common Good: *Three Stories of the Neighbor* 228

Bibliography 251
Index 265

INTRODUCTION

Strangers among Us

Three Stories of the Stranger

Like a Good Stranger . . .

A few years ago, my family and I drove our Mercury Sable to my parents' home in Ontario, Canada. As I made the final left turn onto their road, a motorcycle that had pulled out to pass me in a residential no-passing zone struck the driver's side front quarter-panel of the car, propelling its two riders and their machine over our hood, through the air, and onto my parents' neighbor's lawn. It happened fast—probably a couple hundredths of a second and the crash was over. While my wife worked to reassure our car-seat encumbered young daughters, I pulled over to the curb, jumped out of the vehicle, and tried to figure out what to do. Someone came out of the house whose lawn we'd just relandscaped and telephoned the police. As various people began coming out of their residences to see what the commotion was about, I walked over to where the driver of the wrecked motorcycle lay. He was on his back, semiconscious, mumbling incoherently, and trying to remove his helmet. I sat near his head and, being careful not to touch him, tried to prevent him from removing it lest he hurt himself more. He had been wearing flip-flops, and I could see that his bare feet were broken and badly bruised, with blood pooling just under the skin. The passenger seemed to be less hurt than the driver. The ambulance quickly arrived, lifted both men onto stretchers, and carted them off to the local hospital. My wife and I stayed to give statements to the police officer who arrived at the scene.

That evening I had difficulty falling asleep. I desperately wanted to know whether the young men from the accident had been critically injured or just shaken up. It's a terrible and unsettling thing to be involved in an accident where people are hurt. As you can imagine, privacy acts and such prevent nonfamily members from finding out injury details. In fact, three years went by before I learned anything about the injuries sustained by these young motorcyclists. Then, one day, I was served papers inviting me to participate in a lawsuit designed to relieve me of a sum of one million dollars for a variety of shortcomings including failure to maintain my vehicle, reckless endangerment, and a laundry list of personal vices that were seen as causing the accident. Frightening. Long story short, the motorcycle driver and defendant in the lawsuit did not have any permanent injuries other than post-traumatic stress, and eventually, after I flew to Toronto to give a deposition, my State Farm (insurance) appointed attorney disposed of the lawsuit, and I avoided losing a million dollars I didn't have.

Since the accident, I've thought a lot about the character of the relationships involved. All of the ways I'd been taught to communicate with other human beings seemed inaccessible in this accident and its aftermath. In short, I couldn't address the young man as one human being to another. There were powerful forces at work that colluded to keep the motorcycle driver a stranger to me. I didn't even learn his name until I was served the lawsuit. On my insurance card, it clearly instructs me not to admit fault, not to say "I'm sorry," not to act as a concerned and compassionate human might act. "Like a good neighbor, State Farm is there" goes the jingle. But make no mistake, State Farm and its attorneys are my so-called neighbor in this scenario, not the young man hurt in an encounter with me. In the end, the accident seemed mostly about money, attorneys, maneuvering, self-protection, and self-righteous posturing. I remember a moment of elation when I heard that the defendant (a term used between strangers) was possibly fighting a DUI in a separate case. Elation? I'm glad about this? He's the stranger—faceless, far away, without humanity, and not deserving of my compassion. After the initial shock of the accident, and then being sued, I found myself softening toward this young man, and even wishing him well. I wanted to hear that he was restored to health, that his life was good—and not just so I might be absolved of liability. But the lawsuit, anonymity, and big money at stake turned our backs on each other, and we remained strangers. Never say you're sorry? Never admit fault? What kind of world is that? As part of the legal arrangement closing out the case, I had to agree never to stalk him or try to contact him. We're legally obligated to remain strangers.

Women on the Margins

The Roma people, sometimes referred to as “Gypsies,” are an ethnic minority who trace their origin to the Dalit community in India (often referred to as “untouchables”). Historically a nomadic people, the Roma are primarily concentrated in central, southern, and eastern Europe. Every year in Bulgaria (and undoubtedly in other countries as well) there are bride markets for the Roma community. Young women and girls as young as twelve will wear their best clothes, layer on makeup, and travel with their fathers to the market to be sold to future husbands. During this mortifying and frightening ritual, the girls will simply stand there while men circle them, visually sizing them up as they choose a promising wife. The most beautiful go first and tend to fetch the highest prices for their families. In the Roma communities, a beautiful newborn girl may mean future fortune for her family. As deals are struck in the bride markets, suitors will pay fathers an agreed-on amount in either money, livestock, or property, after which plans commence for the wedding.

While attending a vacation Bible school with her grandchildren, an elderly Roma woman named Nadeshda shared her life story with a former student of mine whose family operates a Christian ministry in Bulgaria.¹ Nadeshda was sold as a child bride at age fifteen.² Her husband was thirty when she married him, and she had her first baby just after she turned sixteen. Nadeshda remembers being angry at her father for selling her to a man—a stranger—who lived in a village so far away she would never again see her brothers or sisters. She remembers the feeling of having no control over her life and not being able to make choices about her future. Of the eight children Nadeshda went on to birth, she had contact with only one. Her husband, who had died years earlier, had been a lazy drunk (her words) who did nothing for his family.

Nadeshda teared up as she expressed thankfulness to the people running the vacation Bible school. They were teaching her grandchildren the sort of things she never had the opportunity to learn herself. She hadn’t been able to go to school to learn to read and write, but she felt hopeful that her grandchildren would learn these things and more at the school that was part of this new church.

Echoes of Nadeshda’s story reverberate around the world—her situation is not atypical. Poverty, early forced marriage, little autonomy or access to power, and the constant threat of interpersonal violence are the lot of many women. Absorbing the lion’s share of global suffering, girls and women are

1. The story is real, but the name is fictitious.

2. Worldwide, an estimated fifty-one million girls have been married before the age of consent. End Slavery Now, “Half the Sky Movement.”

frequently cast in the role of the stranger, and they are far more likely than men to be marginal in the social worlds they inhabit. Around the globe, women are more likely to be oppressed, exploited, and victims of violence. Their incomes are lower, they own less property, and they have far less access to power. Consequently, to “observe” gender is to observe inequality and, by extension, oppression.

Girls and women are routinely denied power in our global society. They are hurt. They are discarded. They are used. They are strangers and almost universally unwelcome, especially in the parts of social groups where power is wielded and negotiated. Consider the following:

Women are present in most social situations. Where they are not present, the reason is not because of their lack of ability or interest but because there have been deliberate efforts to exclude them. Where they are present, women have played roles very different from the popular conception of them (e.g., as passive wives and mothers). Indeed, as wives and as mothers and in a series of other roles, women have, along with men, actively created many situations being studied. Yet though women are actively present in most social situations, scholars, publics, and social actors themselves, both male and female, have often been blind to their presence. Moreover, women’s roles in most social situations, although essential, have been different from, less privileged than, and subordinated to, those of men. Their invisibility is only one indicator of this inequality.³

I’m increasingly aware of how easy it is for me to stand, to direct, and to interact with people in the central and powerful parts of the social worlds I inhabit. I’m White, I’m male, I’m educated, and I’m middle class. I’m no stranger. By contrast, I’ve begun to see the extent to which my daughters and my wife are so frequently marginal to, yet governed by, the realms of power that are readily accessible to me. My minority, adopted daughters (one Roma, from Bulgaria, and the other Chinese) witness few female authority figures in the institutions that shape their young lives. They rarely see people like them (female, of a racial minority) making weighty, authoritative, and consequential decisions. Women are everywhere, but they’re frequently strangers to the parts of society wielding power.

There’s a Church Nearby Where You’ll Feel More Comfortable

There’s a church in the midwestern United States that some of my relatives attend, where I’ve worshiped a good many times, and of which I’m quite fond.

3. Ritzer and Stepnisky, *Modern Sociological Theory*, 291.

The church is situated in a small agricultural town that has grown considerably in recent years. In the past two decades, agribusiness dairy has become the defining industry in this growing community. A number of these large dairies are owned by Christian families who hold membership in, or are closely associated with, this church or similar churches located in the town. Mexican laborers (mostly men) work these farms, many of them saving money and sending it back home to their families. In the decades since these farms moved in and began employing Mexican workers, I've never heard one of these men called by their name. In my presence they've been referred to as "technicians" or "the Mexicans" but never by name. I've heard stories about how hard they work, and how diligent, honest, and devoted they are, but I've heard little else about them. And lamentably, I've never seen a Mexican worker or family attend a service at my relatives' church. There is no Spanish on their church sign, and little evidence that Spanish-speaking people would fit in there. There's no visible antagonism, but there's no invitation either. Sociologist that I am, a few years ago I took it upon myself (and this is why no one likes sociologists!) to ask a minister at the church why I never saw Mexican people in attendance. He told me that "the Mexicans would feel nervous attending church here, but we're building a facility for them down the road a bit where they can worship together." I asked whether they had considered the possibility that Mexican people might like to come to this church if it offered basic headphone translation services (something we did at my church). He replied, "We've already spent our money on the new building down the road." Shortly after this, a Mexican man showed up at this church, and a friendly and genuinely well-meaning elder escorted him back out, explaining how to get to the other church where he might feel more comfortable . . . with his people: Mexicans, laborers—strangers. And sometimes the church youth group raises money for mission trips to Mexico.

These stories—and you probably have your own—illustrate how pervasive the stranger role is in our lives. In the first story, money replaces human compassion, and the system and those who benefit from it *demand* adoption of the stranger posture. The second story shows what pervasive and negative effects can result when a category of people—women, in the example—stand outside the realms of power and are relegated to the role of the stranger. The third story reveals a benevolent and perhaps unintended enforcement of the stranger identity. Be grateful, stranger: We can help you! But we're off to Mexico on our mission trip. . . . See you soon.

I wonder how Jesus might reimagine these stories. I wonder whether he'd stop and say he's sorry to the wounded young man on the motorcycle, not really caring about lawsuits and such. I wonder what he'd think of our world

of men at the center of wealth and power, and of the marginalization of women, so shamefully obvious on the global stage. Would he reinforce male power monopolies, or would he invite women into the center of things? I wonder whether he would start attending the Mexican church instead.

I wonder.

Slave Shackles, Harley Riders, and Mean Girls

For the most part, we experience strangers as naturally occurring phenomena. We know some people; we don't know others. In a world where we face all kinds of risks, it just makes good sense to be wary of strangers. We've all heard stories of elderly people who were duped into giving out their Social Security number or other personal information and who were then exploited. Of course we cringe at the thought that our children could fall into the hands of a stranger, and we diligently instruct them about stranger danger. And there's little doubt that unseen nefarious strangers invade us online, placing us at risk of identity theft. When we think about such strangers, they are mostly people who are disconnected from us—who stand outside our communities, who are inaccessible to us, and who have little chance of engaging us in neighborly contact.

This book is not about such distant strangers, the mythical, shadowy ones who lurk about and want to do us harm and take our things. Rather, this is a book about how we cultivate identity by actively constructing out-groups or strangers around us. Strangers, seen this way, are those “others” who we work to distance ourselves from, often in symbolic ways, not because they pose a danger to us but because our contrast with them—our superiority against their inferiority—affirms our dominant and desirable position in the social hierarchy. Think about how the identities of White people in the antebellum South were established and maintained through their contrast with the Black people around them. During this time, and right up through the Jim Crow⁴ era, when Whites lynched Blacks, the perceived offense frequently came down to Blacks “not knowing their place.”⁵ The so-called offense was blurring the lines between groups—not maintaining “proper” distance between identity camps. If you glance through the lengthy list of Jim Crow laws (separate bathrooms, a Black may not address a White by their first name, a Black man

4. *Jim Crow* is a name for the state and local laws that enforced racial segregation after Reconstruction in the Southern United States.

5. For a sobering experience, examine the map in this article: Lewis, “This Map Shows over a Century of Documented Lynchings.”

may not touch a White woman, and so on), they all pretty much boil down to maintaining a well-defined out-group contrast that was favorable to White identity and that subordinated Black culture and identity.⁶

A few years ago I visited the Lest We Forget Museum of Slavery in Philadelphia as part of a Christian sociology conference.⁷ At this small, modest, privately owned museum, there was an impressive and sobering collection of slave shackles, branding irons, bill-of-sale documents, and other slavery-era artifacts. Combined, these items functioned as cruel and coercive identity props for the dominant White group. And oh the lengths the dominant racial group went to in order to maintain and augment the racial contrast and prevailing social order. One of the final displays in the museum was a large whiskey barrel with the words “Barrel of Laughs” written on its side. When we inquired about this we were told that, during Jim Crow, some cities placed these barrels on street corners. If Black people felt like they were going to laugh or otherwise express emotion in public, they had to put their head in the barrel until the impulse had passed or the emotion was spent. When the individual came up out of the barrel, they were to display a sober, emotion-free face. For emotion reveals humanness. In this way, and a host of others, Whites were able to maintain social distance between themselves and Blacks—“Look, we’re completely different.” In effect, Whites depended on Blacks being strangers in their midst. If you were White, you were not free to be friends with Blacks—in fact, you would be required in formal and informal ways to clearly demonstrate your unmitigated support of the social inequality established between the racial groups. And those differences became normal. Failing to uphold important racial distinctions would result in sanctions, whether you were Black or White (though the sanctions against Whites were usually gentler). All this, though differences between Blacks and Whites do not exist in a “real” way—there is no credible scientific definition for race. In fact, a Black person shares no more genes with another Black person than with a White person, and we all have most genes in common. But the identity functions that exaggerated racial difference have, for the dominant group, arguably made the struggle surrounding Black/White constructed differences the defining characteristic of American history.

The social distance between Blacks and Whites during Jim Crow and beyond is one thing, but what about the other, less significant, less important identities we maintain? We go through life with a variety of identities, many

6. A list of Jim Crow laws can be found at this website: https://www.nps.gov/malu/learn/education/jim_crow_laws.htm.

7. “Lest We Forget Slavery Museum.”

of them operating concurrently in our lives. I'm a father, college professor, motorcycle driver, PC (not Mac!) user, Presbyterian, husband, heterosexual, White male, with a PhD in sociology. Oh, and I only own Fords (my father-in-law was a diemaker for Ford his entire career, and my brother-in-law owns a Ford dealership!). What a quiver of identities! And that's not the half of them. How do I maintain all these identities that, combined, give my life its distinctive character? They show my preferences, loves, and hates. We don't go through life in amorphous ways as though there's no difference between being a father, an uncle, or a high school teacher. These identities (sociologists call them "statuses") help us understand ourselves, and they make our actions intelligible to those around us. The common thread tying them together is that they are established and maintained by creating and sustaining favorable out-group contrasts. Take my "Ford owner" identity (if you think that trucks are an insignificant part of a man's identity in North Georgia, where I live, spend a little time in the South!). People who own Ford F-150s frequently root an important part of their identities in their trucks. Such people actively scan the world for evidence of Ford quality. They resolutely believe the commercial slogans proclaiming such truths as "At Ford, quality is job #1!" And they (we?!) delight in locating information—true or not—that Chevy or Dodge trucks are inferior. Attaching ourselves (I write as a dedicated Ford owner, and my extended family may someday read this book!) to the Ford symbol aligns us with quality, good decision-making, and a host of other admirable social attributes. We're aligned with a winner, and that makes us winners! Have you ever seen the truck window decal of Calvin (from *Calvin and Hobbes*) peeing on a Chevy insignia? Ford owners take that seriously! And Chevy owners have an equivalent decal with Calvin relieving himself on a Ford.

The important point here is that our identities, in all their glorious dimensions, are generally established in opposition to less desirable out-groups. Look back through the list of my identities. I'm a Presbyterian—thank God I'm not a Baptist! I'm a college professor—no blue-collar job here! I'm a father—with this identity the out-group contrast does not fall on non-fathers, but rather on bad fathers. It's pretty easy for me to see my own enlightened parenting tactics in contrast with those of less prodigious fathers. You've probably seen the friendly wars between those who homeschool and those who don't. Often, the mode of schooling you endorse as a father (or mother) functions as an identity platform that serves to remind you of your own diligence and morality in the face of those who use other, "lesser," educational approaches with their children (my insecurity leads me to make a lot of homeschool jokes!). I have a PhD in sociology, and we

(sociologists) quickly correct well-meaning people who confuse us with psychologists. The very thought! Finally, I noted that I am a motorcycle driver. While you would think that there would be a friendly bond among motorcycle drivers (and in many respects there is), Harley-Davidson owners (I own a Honda) generally do not see those of us who motor along on Japanese bikes as “real” motorcyclists. If you’ve ever driven a motorcycle, you know that bikers wave at each other as they pass going opposite directions. I’ve recently learned, much to my dismay, that there is a growing movement among Harley riders to only wave at other Harley riders! And some people are serious about this! How thinly we slice our identities. Try riding a Suzuki to a Harley-Davidson rally and see if you feel safe! I sometimes drive around on my brother-in-law’s Harley just to see how the “real” bikers live!

The 2004 movie *Mean Girls*, starring Lindsey Lohan, provides an instructive example of the ways people construct identity by creating out-groups.⁸ In the movie, after being homeschooled somewhere in Africa for fifteen years, Lohan’s character, Cady Heron, moves with her family to an American town where she must learn to navigate the cruel cliques, factions, in-groups, and out-groups of a large public school. While Heron fairly quickly forms friendships with a small group of “unpopular” teens (you know the type caricatured in movies), she finds herself pulled toward the dominant clique of beautiful, fashionable girls who her new friends call the “plastics”—“the A-list girl clique at her new school,” as the movie’s promotional blurb puts it.⁹ The plastics rule the school—people are envious of them and many want to be noticed, praised, or accepted by them. But the plastics construct their identities through bullying, degrading, and cultivating envy. Their identity is in the contrast (there’s really not much more to them), and they actively look for ways to belittle “inferior” others. Most of their time is spent making strangers. The movie’s lesson emerges when Cady Heron recognizes how easily she is drawn away from her kinder, gentler, more vulnerable group of friends toward the plastics. The redemptive turn in *Mean Girls* comes when Cady casts off her plastic identity and renews her previous friendships. This movie was a popular success in part because we all recognize these various cliques in high school settings (and beyond), we know the damage they can do, and we simultaneously feel their pull. The plastics would not exist without subordinated groups to prop up their identities. If we’re honest, our own identities have plenty of plastic parts.

8. Waters, *Mean Girls*.

9. Waters, *Mean Girls*.

The Eyes of a Stranger

And so, our world takes on an oppositional cast, and we come to live among strangers in a zero-sum identity game—they lose, we win. As social psychologist Ken Gergen laments, “We scan the world to ensure we are better than all.”¹⁰ So many stranger categories are required to maintain our identities: Black/White, Christian/non-Christian, gay/straight, blue-collar/white-collar, American citizen / noncitizen, Republican/Democrat, college-educated / high school dropout, male/female, Protestant/Catholic/Jew/Muslim, Tennessee/Alabama (Southeastern Conference Football rivalry), fat/thin, tall/short, plastics/nerds, blue eyes / brown eyes, and so on.

This last contrast—blue eyes / brown eyes—was explored in a famous third-grade classroom experiment conducted by Jane Elliott on April 5, 1968, the day after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.¹¹ Elliott wanted to help her young students understand the experience of racism and discrimination. She divided the students into two groups—those with blue eyes and those with brown eyes. Blue-eyed students were given all kinds of privilege over brown-eyed students. For example, blue-eyed students got to sit in the front of the classroom while those with brown eyes were banished to the back, and blue-eyed students were encouraged to play *only* with other blue-eyed students. Elliott didn’t let the two groups drink from the same water fountain. She gave blue-eyed students extra time at recess and extra helpings (of delicious cafeteria food?!) at lunch. Furthermore, she used brown-eyed students as negative examples when she taught, and she even gave the brown-eyed students misinformation, telling them that the superior intellects of blue-eyed students came from higher levels of melanin in their bodies. Full-grown adults have accepted supposed biological realities about race on thinner scientific evidence!

The effects of this little experiment were dramatic. Blue-eyed students, in response to their superior position in the classroom, rose to the occasion, becoming bossy and mean-spirited toward their former brown-eyed friends. They completed phonics drills in about half the time it previously took them. “The very first day I taught the lesson,” Elliott recalled, “it seemed to me that students in the so-called ‘superior’ group were performing academically in ways that would have been impossible for them the day before.”¹² In contrast, brown-eyed students became timid and subservient, and they scored poorly on tests. They also isolated themselves on the playground during recess. The next week, Elliott reversed the experiment, privileging the brown-eyed students.

10. Gergen, *Relational Being*, 16.

11. Peters, *Eye of the Storm*.

12. Peters, *Class Divided*, 108.

While she did witness some of the behaviors present in the first iteration of the exercise, the effect was much less intense (probably because the original experiment sensitized the children to what was going on).

If a teacher, in the space of one day, can cultivate stranger identities among groups of students who had been friends in an elementary school classroom, and if group identity can be established with such trivial criteria, how much more do *we* fortify our important identities by pushing strangers out of our various playgrounds? This same process, so decisively demonstrated by Elliott in her effort to help White students understand racism and discrimination, operates simultaneously on many identity fronts in our lives. The stranger phenomenon occurs at international levels, where nations jockey for superior position (just think about the rhetoric of war continually bouncing back and forth between the US and North Korea). It happens in schools. It happens among groups defined by race and social class. And it happens in churches. The Sunday after the Supreme Court decision about gay marriage, I attended an adult Sunday school class. I don't recall the subject of the lesson, but we were talking about the implications of the court's decision. As I listened, I heard comments like the following: "Before you know it *they'll* be teaching in our schools, and there won't be a thing you can do about it." "I'm so sick of *them* pushing their agenda on us." I was curious about this animosity, so I looked up church signs about LGBTQI+ people¹³ and read things like, "Turn or burn," "God is good, gays are bad," "Homosexuals must repent or go to hell," and "God created man & woman; Satan made gays & transgender." These have not a hint of Christian hospitality or neighborliness about them. And to a desperate world, the church can seem fixated on its in-group identity, extending little grace to the strangers nearby. Yet we who were once far away have been brought near (Eph. 2:13). . . . We who were strangers have been declared sons and daughters.

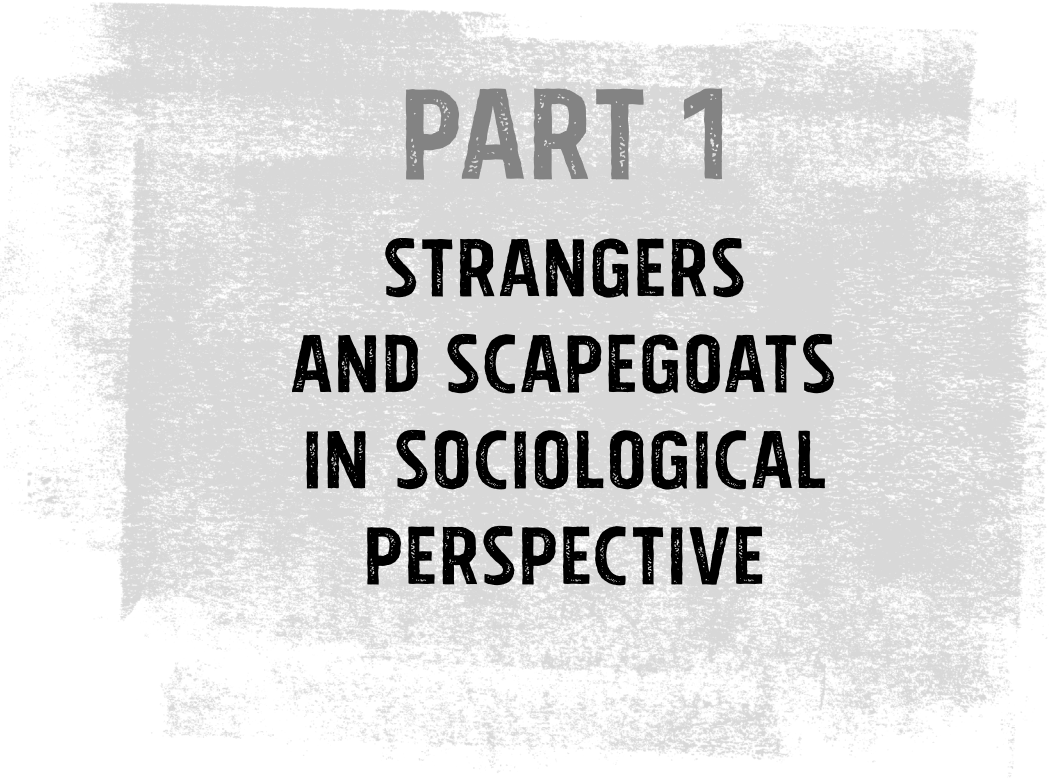
Inviting Strangers

This book is about learning to see "strangers" in new ways and, in so doing, to see ourselves with fresh eyes. It's about opening ourselves to strangers—some quite near to us—who we've never before noticed. It's about recognizing the myriad ways our own thirst for identity is slaked by keeping "them" away from "our" drinking fountain. And it's about just how much of the "plastics"

13. The media generally use the now familiar acronym LGBTQ+ to refer to sexual minorities. In this book, on advice from guest author Val Hiebert, I use LGBTQI+, with the "I" representing intersex people who sometimes feel invisible, even in contexts addressing sexual minorities.

still live in us. While we (and I write primarily for people of faith) wrest identity for ourselves through oppositional relationships and social comparison, being heralds of the good news of Jesus Christ requires a different posture toward others and a different basis for identity. The gospel itself is a story of how strangers became neighbors and friends—it's a story culminating in the great wedding feast of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9) to which all who are thirsty are invited (22:17), in a city whose gates are always open (21:25). Imagine that. If we're in the habit of stranger-making, engaging in downward social comparison, and keeping "them" away from "us," we offer but a pale gospel to a desperate and identity-impoverished world. Plus, we'll miss many of the good things that "strange" others can bring into our lives. We are the people of God, not for ourselves but for the world—a world that we must know, love, and nurture. We people of God are exhorted to avoid the "patterns of this world." Finding identity at the expense of others—by making strangers of them, guarding resources for ourselves, and taking the seat of greater honor—is *the* dominant pattern of this world. It's the pattern at work, in sports, in our neighborhoods, in international politics, at church, in school, and just about everywhere else. Opening ourselves to others in new ways can make for a safer and more just world, and it moves us closer to the sort of identities that commend us as the people of God.

In working toward these goals, I will draw on a number of sociological and theological frameworks that illuminate some of the unseen ways we interact as human and social beings. As I bring these frameworks to bear on the myriad ways in which we create and maintain strangers, I hope that they will complement and bring new understanding to some of the things you've already read in the Scriptures. Sociology has some remarkable things to offer the person of faith who looks to the Scriptures for wisdom and illumination. Finally, I hope that by the end of this book you will have learned to recognize some of the ways that we (sometimes intentionally, sometimes inadvertently) push others outside the boundaries of our various worlds, where they remain strangers to us. As you learn to edge toward those who stand outside the bounds of your worlds, I invite you to a new boldness about who you are, as you embrace and embody an identity that is rooted in Christ, worked out among God's people, and lived for the sake of his kingdom. "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:19).



PART 1

**STRANGERS
AND SCAPEGOATS
IN SOCIOLOGICAL
PERSPECTIVE**

CHAPTER ONE

CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY

The Self, the Social, and the Stranger

On September 26, 2017, Saudi Arabia’s King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud issued an order that opened the way for Saudi women to obtain driver’s licenses.¹ This story caught my eye as I sat in my North Georgia home browsing the news. At the time, my wife was in Grand Rapids, Michigan, attending a work-related conference. Two days earlier she’d taken her driver’s license, started her car, driven to the airport, and headed out. All on her own! She’ll be back tonight, and I don’t even have to go to the airport to pick her up as her car is waiting in the long-term parking lot! I should probably buy flowers and show up in baggage claim, but after twenty-five years of marriage, I’m pretty sure she’d rather come home to a clean house and kids who’ve finished their homework. I better get to work. I can’t imagine what life would be like for us—with our three kids and frenetic lifestyle—if she were not able to legally drive a vehicle. Were her license revoked for some reason, my life would become considerably more complicated. It’s difficult to imagine what I’d gain from a moratorium on women’s driving here in the US.

King Salman’s edict leaves many questions. Will women need their husband’s (or some other male’s) permission to get a license or drive a vehicle? Will women’s driving infractions be penalized more harshly than men’s? Will social

1. Hubbard, “Saudi Arabia Agrees to Let Women Drive.”

pressures discouraging women from driving outweigh the potential benefits to them? In 1990, forty-seven Saudi women challenged the ban, whereupon they promptly lost their jobs, were shunned, and were banned from traveling for years. It was challenged again in 2011, when activist Maha al-Qahtani became the first Saudi woman to receive a ticket—but the effort fell apart after a few women were jailed for driving.²

The Saudi driving ban and the new order that rescinds it exist in a complex context. When Saudi women get behind the wheel, they do so in a social space where traditional meets modern, religious meets secular, freedom meets restriction, and where even things like driving must be done in compliance with Islamic law. King Salman's decision was backed by a majority of members of the Council of Senior Scholars, Saudi Arabia's highest religious body.³ Women are allowed to be members of the council, but they must sit in a different room from their male counterparts.⁴ No mixing. In this and in so many other dimensions of Saudi life, we see clear boundaries drawn between men and women, insiders and outsiders, actors and those acted on, centrals and marginals. My guess is that even with the license victory, women will still stand in the shadows of Saudi society.

Nonetheless, both Saudi women and other women who posted comments on websites that carried the story see this new direction as a major victory. And it is. They recognize that profound change won't happen overnight, but as one woman, Manal al-Sharif, an activist who has been jailed for driving, stated on Twitter, "Saudi Arabia will never be the same again. The rain begins with a single drop." She also explained that the driving ban's removal is "just the start to end long-standing unjust laws that have always considered Saudi women minors who are not trusted to drive their own destiny."⁵

When activists press for women to access rights and privileges equivalent to those enjoyed by men, they're challenging social arrangements in which some people are insiders and others are outsiders. When one group actively violates or simply ignores the rights of another, often more is going on than simple cruelty or resource guarding. Usually the identity of the dominant group is at stake. Why won't Saudi men allow women to drive? Why can't women sit in the same council room with their male "colleagues"? The basic answer is that, in important ways, Saudi male identity is established and sustained in its contrast with the subordinated and inferior status of women. Humans identify as group members, and a dominant group's identity exists in how it stacks up

2. Kennedy, "Saudi Arabia Says It Will End Ban."

3. Human Rights Watch, "Saudi Arabia."

4. "Women Can Be on Council."

5. Kalin and Paul, "Rain Begins with a Single Drop."

against a relevant subordinated group. In effect, in this and other contexts, a man is a man because he's not at all like a woman. We even learn to refer to men and women as the "opposite" sex. When women's status improves, the distinction between men and women is reduced, and a primal identity threat for males rears its head. Some men feel threatened when women begin to "invade" their turf, especially in cultures that maintain great distinction between men and women. I've heard men talk in derisive tones about the "feminist agenda"—not acknowledging that the so-called feminist agenda is mostly a push for the things men already enjoy. But since men constitute the dominant group, no one speaks of the "masculine" agenda. . . . It's just "normal." Thus for the sake of a positive identity, the male group, Saudi or otherwise, maintains an out-group—a group of female "strangers." If you google pictures of Saudi women driving, you'll see no recognizable faces—they are veiled, hidden, invisible. They're strangers—different, less than, maligned, controlled. And for trying to advance in status and move into the circles where they may be known, they have paid, and will continue to pay, a high price.

It's not just gender identity that functions this way. The driver's license story underscores a process that governs and characterizes interactions between many dominant/subordinate human groups (Black/White, citizen/noncitizen, white-collar/blue-collar, etc.). In short, and as I'll develop presently, we identify as group members, and group identity is established through positive contrast with relevant out-groups. Groups look for, create, and maintain those "less than," and use such oppositional relationships to establish themselves.

Connecting and Disconnecting

Humans are eminently social beings. We spend vast portions of our lives trying to connect with others. In fact, social connection is pretty much the sum of our life's activity. We join clubs and sports teams in school, we marry and have children, we join churches, civic organizations, and bowling leagues. We cultivate followers on Twitter and Instagram. And that's not the half of it. Even when we're alone, we have inner conversations about our relationships. When I'm by myself, I think constantly about my children or my wife, and I wonder what my students thought about my most recent lecture. As I write this chapter, I pause frequently to ask myself how readers will connect to it and thus to me. Even something as mundane as looking in the mirror is done with a view to social comparison—"Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?" In our myriad attempts to connect with others, we're insiders (accepted group members) in some settings and outsiders or "strangers" in

others. I've watched my children (and myself on occasion!) fantasize about what it would be like to be a celebrity—a famous musician, actor, or sociologist (one can dream!). We're enchanted with celebrities, in large part because they seem so universally embraced by the people around them. Who doesn't want to have lunch with George Clooney, Julia Roberts, Bono, or Beyoncé? Celebrities always have a place at the table—everyone knows their names. They're insiders. They fit. Conversely, we're frightened of being outcasts, of being shunned, stigmatized, or embarrassed by others—especially groups of others. Many movies aimed at teens develop the theme of fitting in, in one way or another. And we've all been saddened by a story about someone who committed suicide, in part, because they just couldn't connect with others.

Our abiding need to be embraced by the social groups that compose our worlds, and our relentless push to connect, testifies to a fundamental feature of human existence: for us, there is no such thing as “alone.” In important ways, we just don't exist apart from others. I'm not saying that we don't go off by ourselves from time to time. Rather, humanness itself is something social. We're always located within a social group, always sustained by the social, and everything that holds value for us is of social origin. Despite our feelings of autonomy and individuality, we humans are the product of relationships (with God, with others), dependent from first to last. In fact, most of our efforts to stand apart, stand alone, distinguish ourselves from others, or achieve independence from those around us have pathological and damaging effects (more on this later). We were made to connect; we were made for fellowship—self *with* others. Alone we are not.

However, we normally think about self and identity in atomistic ways. I just “am.” I have my preferences, hopes, fears, doubts, and so on. This sort of thinking envisions the people and groups around me as fundamentally separate from me. I engage with them, but there is a distinct line of separation between “me” and “them.” And our (Western) world supports this individualistic view of the self. Our legal system champions the rights of the individual. In school our individual academic achievements are recorded (to the second decimal!) on a report card. When I win the hundred-meter sprint, I stand alone on the podium. This view of the self—the dominant view at present—positions a person against others. And in such a world, the goal of most people becomes social distinction—separating oneself. Accordingly, we try to beat, dominate, control, destroy, and crush many of those who would occupy the sacred space of the self with us. We learn to think of others as opponents because a win for them feels like a loss for us and vice versa. Ever watch the disappointment on the face of an Olympic silver medalist? She failed to stand alone, to set herself apart from others, to be the best in the

world. Social psychologists tell us that silver medalists are less satisfied with their performance than athletes who won bronze. Barely missing the distinction of being the best continues to haunt them. Jerry Seinfeld parodies this in a comedic sketch where he explains how we all know the name of the guy who won gold, but silver . . . never heard of him! “What happened? Didn’t he hear the gun go off? Forget to tie his shoe?”⁶ So much of our world promotes this view of the self—a view where a person’s value is found in their ability to disconnect from, to be set apart from, those around them. I win and you lose. Shirl James Hoffman laments that many collegiate sports teams no longer eat lunch with “opposing” teams because seeing other players as friends inhibits the killer spirit that athletes need to crush their opponents on the field—a field where “losing is not an option.”⁷

The competitive “I win, you lose” view of humanity is, though it doesn’t have to be, fundamental to the way we conceptualize the Western self. A consequence of this way of understanding identity is that we establish ourselves as the antithesis of others, learning to see ourselves favorably in comparison. And efforts at comparison can become ridiculous. In an episode of *Seinfeld*, the character Kramer is found taking karate and dominating in his dojo. When Jerry goes to witness this, he finds Kramer sparring with much younger opponents. Says Jerry, “You’re beating up ten-year-olds,” poignantly illustrating the absurdity of our compulsion to win, to dominate, and to stand alone.⁸

Social comparison as a means to positive identity is itself rooted in intergroup (between group) dynamics. Social identity theorists (which we’ll get into later) explain that we see ourselves as group members (my family, my school, my church, my team) and that group identity is established through favorable comparison with relevant out-groups. So, to be a Presbyterian might not be primarily about a group’s commitment to distinctive Presbyterian beliefs as much as it’s about theological superiority over, say, Southern Baptists or Roman Catholics. When I was in a graduate program in education administration and taking a course on multiculturalism, we, the students, had the opportunity to invite leaders from our religious communities to serve on a panel. What a great opportunity! Only none of us actually listened to anyone but our own guest on the day of the panel. It was like an athletic contest. We students organized ourselves into little religious communities of two or three, and we rooted for our invited leader. We groaned when one of the infidels made an illogical point, and we grinned when our own saint voiced some unassailable truth. Rather than really learning something about the impressive

6. Seinfeld, *I’m Telling You for the Last Time*.

7. Hoffman, *Good Game*, 152–53.

8. Ackerman, *Seinfeld*.

array of religious perspectives represented in the room, we mostly squandered the opportunity, rooting for our champion in a religious tennis match.

Social identity theorists explain that we don't simply "encounter" groups that seem to be inferior to our own; rather, we actively look for them, and when we can't find them, we take measures to construct out-groups. And out-groups are everywhere. Think about the social gulf between men and women, Presbyterians and Baptists, athletes and band nerds, Whites and Blacks, Americans and terrorists, homeschoolers and public school kids, and so on. Witness the reaction of a dominant group when a subordinate group moves ever so slightly in the direction of equality. As we saw in the story about Saudi women and the right to drive, gender functions as a critically important organizing structure. Think about the insult intended when someone describes a man in "feminine" terms. "You throw like a girl" stands as the ultimate insult to a male athlete. The request, "We need a few strong men to carry tables over to the fellowship hall after the service" performs a similar identity function for men, affirming them for their strength in contrast with women who are, ostensibly, weaker. In-group/out-group. And these biased, group-based comparisons take place along every conceivable dimension of human life.

The point is that our identities rest on comparing favorably with out-groups. Who we are and how we see ourselves depends on the presence of strangers, real and implied, in our lives. All of the categories by which we measure our worth—race, gender, social class, education, athletic ability, intelligence, attractiveness, and so on—take on meaning, become valuable, and are maintained through social comparison. And though we might know those who provide our out-group contrast, I'm referring to them as strangers. Strangers, in this sense, are others who we, for one reason or another, push away or hold at arm's length because inviting them into full and equal fellowship would cast doubt on our own fragile identities. Of course, Jesus invited strangers and social pariahs into his inner circle all the time—think here of the woman with the issue of blood, lepers, children, or the woman caught in adultery. Jesus always found identity in something other than out-group comparisons. "Zacchaeus, I'm coming to your house today. You'll be no stranger to me" (Luke 19:5). And the Pharisees were always worried about eating with sinners.

Some strangers are easy to identify. Perhaps "illegal" immigrants come to mind here. "They" take our hard-earned resources, and in our often caustic words about "illegals," we draw attention to our own virtue and worthiness. Increasingly, appealing to a voter constituency depends on vilifying an out-group. "Illegal" immigrants became an identity linchpin in the 2016 US national election. Some strangers are less visible to us because we've accepted

social distance from them as a normal part of everyday life. Gender provides a good example of “familiar” strangers. A wife, for example, can be stranger to her husband when her assumed inferiority augments his identity.

The rest of this chapter will examine some ways that our identities are inseparable from the groups we are members of. As we explore this, we will focus on the destructive character of an ethic of individualism that establishes identity on the basis of disconnection from others. The last part of the chapter will provide an overview of German sociologist Georg Simmel’s now classic treatise on the stranger. Simmel helps us understand just where strangers “fit” in the context of a group, and he draws attention to the benefits that accompany the stranger.

Let Me Introduce Myself

Next time you’re asked to introduce yourself, try the following: In your introduction, make no reference to any groups in which you hold membership. Just talk about yourself. Try it! You’ll find this quite impossible, and the results will be puzzling to your audience. Since you can’t talk about your family, school, a football team you love, a church, or a nation to which you’re loyal, you’ll be reduced to identifying a few idiosyncratic quirks, such as “I like pizza.” And then it will dawn on you, as your sociological instincts kick in, that liking pizza isn’t something that originated inside of you. Rather, it began in the groups (your family, youth groups, etc.) where you learned to like pizza—groups that also instructed you about which foods to regard as disgusting.

Then start over and introduce yourself again but with one difference. This time, refer to any groups you wish—no restrictions. Now you can talk about your family, school, church, a person you’re in love with, the Chicago Cubs, and so on. Notice how, in the absence of group ties, you were hard pressed to explain who “you” were. Also notice that outside of referring to groups, you really can’t talk about what you love. To know yourself is to locate yourself within the boundaries of a variety of social groups, and to love something or someone is to locate yourself in culture and tradition. Even the enjoyment we have of certain objects (I have a motorcycle of which I’m quite fond) derives from their cultural history, from their place in traditions that have given them value. And, of course, “tradition” is a by-product of a group. In an important way, there is no “you” outside of engagement with and immersion in groups. Groups create you; groups sustain you. It’s fascinating that in a culture that so highly prizes individualism (I write as an American here), it is through groups that we establish and maintain identity. To stand alone, apart from others, is

to have nothing and to be nothing. Having money, enjoying social position or success, and possessing impressive talent, strength, or striking good looks all derive their value from groups—from relationships. What's the point in being really good looking if there's no one to admire you?!

Social groups predate us (we're born into them) and will be there long after we're gone. Sociologists like to point out that humans, as social beings, are more reflective of things outside us than inside us. Accordingly, much sociology is focused on how group bonds that are too weak or too strong can have negative and pathological effects on people. When they're too weak, we have difficulty knowing who we are—think about how your identity is rooted in a family, a marriage, a workplace, a soccer team. Take away a person's job and the previously attempted introductions become a bit more difficult—consider how quickly people ask each other what they do for a living. And on the opposite end of the spectrum, when group ties are too strong—like in a cult—we lose our identities as individuals, as the collective overwhelms any sense of the importance of self. In short, personal identity is a function of a tenuous balance between the group and the individual. And viewed sociologically, individual identity proceeds from the group, not the group from the individual.

We spend vast portions of our lives asking the simple question, “Who am I?” Liminal points in life—those murky, in-between places where we transition to new identities—generally move us to ponder who we are. Going off to college, getting married, having a child, tackling a new career, having your last child leave home, or learning to function with a newly diagnosed chronic illness all compel us to pause and ponder our identities. “Who am I, and what do these changes in my life mean for the person I am becoming?” And the above list contains pretty normal things that many, if not most, people go through. You can, undoubtedly, think of other identity markers I haven't noted. Look at my short list again. What is common to these transitional experiences? They all demarcate a change in the individual's stance within, or in relationship to, one group or another. For example, think about a student leaving home to go off to college for the first time—something I observe each year in my role as a college professor. From the moment (usually one anticipated for some time) that their parents drop them off in front of their new dormitory, peel out of the parking lot, and head home to convert the empty bedroom into a reading room, a new college student is thrust, very suddenly, into crisis as the identity he or she built over the past eighteen years shudders and buckles. Familiar worlds fall away. Former restrictions like curfews simply vanish. Don't want to get up in the morning? Then don't! Exciting? Yes and no. We humans don't deal well with rapid change. A change in our fortunes, whether it's a good change or a bad change, can upset our equilibrium, sometimes quite severely.

Why? Again, it goes back to our relationship with the familiar groups that structure our world. Fast-paced change upsets, obliterates, strains, and alters our ties to the groups in which we are members, thwarting predictability. Going off to college, which may turn out to be a very good thing for a person, severs old ties (not permanently, but fairly radically nonetheless) and initiates new ones almost overnight. There's little transition and little space to regain balance. And abrupt transitions can overwhelm us. Accordingly, it's not at all unusual to find depression and homesickness lurking just behind the "Isn't this great?" façade of the new college student. By second semester, generally, relationships are established, and identity is again secure, albeit an identity that is different from before.

Winning the Lotto, Losing Yourself

The life stories of lottery winners provide interesting, yet unsettling, examples of how rapid changes in someone's relationship to a group can have detrimental effects on their life. Wouldn't you like to win the lottery? Who hasn't fantasized about that a time or two? Wouldn't your problems just evaporate? Well . . . probably not. In fact, the suicide rate for lottery winners is significantly higher than the rate for the general US population. And this seems strange. But think about what winning an impressive amount of money would do to your life. It would change everything—and not necessarily for the better.

On August 23, 2017, Mavis Wanczyk won the \$758.7 million Powerball jackpot—the largest single lottery jackpot in history.⁹ Wow! The first thing fifty-three-year-old Mavis did was to quit her job—not an unusual move among big lottery winners. Remember the old Johnny Paycheck song “Take This Job and Shove It”? Who wouldn't quit their job? Even if Mavis had wanted to remain in her present employment, it would be all but impossible. How would she take direction or orders from a boss who could no longer hold a paycheck over her? Where would the motivation to show up at 8 a.m. come from? But the important thing to notice is that abruptly quitting a job severs ties to a group that has, for better or worse, structured one's life. And that's only the beginning. All of the groups and people that formerly had regulatory power over Mavis now have no influence at all. And while that sounds great, think about how much of our lives are lived amid negotiating with others. Our lives exist in the midst of the mundane. Émile Durkheim, a French sociologist who lived from 1858–1917, saw the group (or the social) as producing the individual, not the other way around. Seen this way, society gives birth to you, rather

9. Isidore and Kaufman, “We Have a Powerball Winner!”

than you to society. To be cut off from society (or from community) and free from social restraints is like being a child with no parents or family. Though a child may feel constricted by the rules enforced by their parents, what may feel coercive is necessary if they are to flourish. “For Durkheim, freedom came from without rather than from within.”¹⁰ We are most content when we are most bound to (and restrained by) the groups around us.

I conduct a simple exercise with freshman college students in my Principles of Sociology class that requires them to respond to such a scenario. Imagine you’ve won \$100 million (pocket change for Mavis Wanczyk!). Where would you live? How much would your house cost? Would you stay in college? This college? Would you tithe at your church? Would you give money to your parents? What about to the uninsured family of one of your dorm-mates whose mother was just diagnosed with an aggressive cancer? Who would you not give money to? What kind of car would you buy? (You’d be surprised how often I hear “Honda Civic” in response to this question.) Would you travel? Commercial or chartered flights? Where would it all stop?

Now, these all sound like great problems to have. Who wouldn’t want the “burden” of giving money to friends and family, or the freedom to quit a tedious job? It’s the American dream, is it not? But think again. Winning a lottery would disrupt all of the settled patterns in your life. When I ask my students various questions about what would change in their lives if they won a huge lottery jackpot, I almost always find that they intend to live about the same lives, with the same relationships, but with more money stirred in. And that simply wouldn’t happen. Winning a lottery would profoundly change the character of a person’s relationship to almost all the groups of which they are members. For example, think about church. Would you tithe (or give any percentage) on \$100 million? What if you didn’t? What if you gave what you give now? Wouldn’t that raise a few eyebrows? The point is that your relationship with your church (or your college, family, friends, significant other, soccer team, workplace, or . . .) would change whether you liked it or not because \$100 million makes all your relationships negotiable. It weakens your ties to the groups presently constraining you. Must you listen to your parents when you have that kind of coin? Only if you want to. Do you put up with a boss who doesn’t seem to respect you or treat you well? Probably not. And whenever there was romantic attraction between you and another, you would always have that nagging question about love and money. Because you aren’t just you when you have \$100 million. But oddly, it’s not having the money that would push you to the breaking point; it’s the speed at which

10. Ritzer, *Sociological Theory*, 99.

you came into the money. Earn that money slowly, over forty years or so, and you have a much better chance at maintaining equilibrium. Win it overnight and you don't have time to adjust to the changes in your relationships with other people. And huge money won overnight separates us from others in profound and unseen ways. In effect, winning the lottery pushes the people around us outward toward the "stranger" end of the human spectrum. The dismal statistics on lottery winners testify to what happens when the bonds that tie us to others are abruptly loosened.

Simmel's Stranger

Imagine living in a really close-knit community. In this place almost everyone would be familiar. Other community members would know most things about you, and for the most part you would feel safe. Life in such a place would be fairly predictable, and you would feel included and needed by the people around you. Sound good? We're drawn to scenarios that feel familiar and nostalgic. I think this is the reason that television programs like *The Andy Griffith Show*, *The Jeffersons*, *Cheers*, *Friends*, and *Saved by the Bell* can still be found in syndication or on streaming services years after they've ended. Though they appeal to different demographics, they offer a safe respite from a world where strangers press in. *Cheers*, which ran for eleven seasons and revolves around people who frequent the same bar in Boston, features the theme song, "Where Everybody Knows Your Name."¹¹ This bar is a place without strangers, where almost everyone's a friend or a neighbor. In the twenty-first century, where it sometimes seems like everyone's a stranger, escaping into a thirty-minute program where we can live vicariously among friends and neighbors for a bit is a welcome relief.

But what would a place with no strangers be like? Would it really be a good place to live? Also, do you ever wish that you were, even for a short time, in a place where *you* were the stranger—where not everyone knew you? Of course there's the other extreme as well. Some people live in places where everyone's a stranger to them. David Riesman's famous book *The Lonely Crowd* gets at this idea of being lonely while surrounded by people—by strangers.¹² And German sociologist Georg Simmel, who we'll encounter presently, writes, "Under certain circumstances, one never feels as lonely and as deserted as in this metropolitan crush of persons."¹³

11. Burrows, Ratzenberger, and Beren, *Cheers*.

12. Riesman, *Lonely Crowd*.

13. Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms*, 334.

Strangers present a difficult conundrum for us. On the one hand, they pose a threat. They may intrude on our safety, but perhaps more unsettling, they can weaken our solidarity, bringing new, unwelcome, and destabilizing ideas into “our” midst, forcing us to reconsider who we are, how we act, how we live. Think about Harrison Ford’s character—detective John Book—in the 1985 movie *Witness*.¹⁴ To protect a young Amish boy who has witnessed a murder, Book moves into an Amish community with the boy and his widowed mother. Though Officer Book is there to protect the boy from police corruption, as a stranger in town he represents a serious threat to the Amish and their countercultural way of life. Before long he’s romantically inclined toward the boy’s mother, getting in fistfights with other outsiders who bully the community members (strict adherents to a doctrine of nonviolence), and bringing guns into the settlement. As a stranger, John Book, with his modern, worldly ways and attitudes, is perhaps a greater threat to the Amish than the original threat against the young boy. For his ways can undo their ways. His ways raise difficult questions. His ways make their ways look quaint and ineffective. Their orthodoxy is not his orthodoxy, and he erodes the plausibility structures that support their way of life. In the movie, leaders of the Amish community want nothing more than for Book to leave them so they can go back to the way things were. Saving them from threat? He is the threat!

On the other hand, don’t we want to live in a world that’s welcoming to strangers and that sees a benefit to including outsiders? It’s an ugly thing when wealthy countries refuse to admit desperate refugees fleeing persecution. And isn’t it refreshing, every so often, to take on the role and persona of the stranger ourselves? After attending a small (first through eighth grades in two classrooms) elementary school, a Christian high school of around 120 students, and a Christian college that matriculated about five hundred students a year by the time I graduated, I was glad to be on the huge campus of the University of Tennessee at Knoxville for graduate school. The anonymity felt wonderful. It was good to be the stranger, the outsider. The experience was freeing, and I felt like I could think clearly and without restriction or public commitment to “our” worldview.

I visited a “no strangers” community a few years ago during an outing for an annual Christian sociology conference I attend. Our midwestern host college set up a visit to a nearby Hutterite colony. The Hutterites are an Anabaptist group (an offshoot of Protestantism coming out of the Radical Reformation of the sixteenth century), similar in a number of ways to the Amish and the Mennonites but with several important distinctions. To the naive

14. Weir, *Witness*.

observer, Hutterites look like the Amish, wearing simple, handmade clothes, with women always in long dresses and donning head coverings. One of the key differences between the Amish and the Hutterites is that the Amish shun most technology but live out “in the world,” while the Hutterites selectively use much of the technology you find in the outside modern world (albeit in heavily filtered ways) but sequester themselves in colonies, away from secular society. In a way, the groups simply choose different modes of sequestration.

These differences between how the Amish and the Hutterites position themselves relative to the modern world significantly affect the posture each group takes toward strangers. Many of the Amish feel called by God to take in any needy person who comes to them for help. On the way to the Hutterite colony, we visited several Amish homes, where we were able to ask questions and talk with families. In one of these homes, there were non-Amish adults who had varying degrees of intellectual disability or some form of mental illness. Our Amish host explained that when people show up looking for help, they simply take them in, out of obedience to God’s call to care for those (strangers) in need. The Hutterites, in contrast, were less likely to have strangers show up on their doorstep, mostly owing to their geographic distance from other cities and towns and to the gated character of their compounds.

We had to drive quite a distance, down long, straight gravel roads, to find the Hutterite colony we were to visit. And the community we visited was definitely gated—in both physical and symbolic ways. Being far away from any city, store, or neighborhood is itself a kind of gate. Upon arrival we were met by our host, who handed us off to a small group of charming young women (somewhere around age nineteen or twenty), clothed in long dresses they had sewn themselves, who led us on a tour of their facilities. Different from what I expected, this colony made its livelihood from an impressive, highly technological, and fully automated agribusiness turkey farm—didn’t see that coming! We got to walk through the barns and see and hear about their various operations. Everything was clean and well organized—well, as clean as ten thousand turkeys can be!

Lunch consisted of grilled hamburgers from home-grown beef, on home-made rolls—it was really good food. As we finished our lunch and completed the tour, I remember a warm feeling about the place. It felt good. It seemed to be the sort of arrangement that we envision when we say things like, “We need more community in our lives.” People were closely bonded, life was simple, and the path forward was clear. While we were there, we saw several teenage girls proudly wearing brightly colored Crocs (inexpensive molded shoes) and chatting excitedly about their recent acquisitions. Inquiring, we learned that girls were permitted to leave the colony only about twice a year—and one of

those outings was for shoe shopping. This colony did not permit girls to get driver's licenses or leave the compound without preapproved male accompaniment. The group was governed by a minister and a business manager—both men. Furthermore, everyone—some eighty people—in this colony had the same last name, and we glimpsed some evidence of the genetic anomalies that can enter into closed societies with a narrow gene pool.

Nonetheless, I concluded the tour with a positive feeling about this “traditional” community, its simplicity, and its care for its members. It wasn't what I'd want for my own life, but it did have a certain appeal. As we boarded our van and drove back to the college to resume our hectic modern lives, we chatted about our outing. Many of my colleagues shared my cozy feelings about how the colony resonated with warmth and respite from the pressures of the modern world. But one woman in our group—a long-term and well-respected member—emerged from the experience livid with anger. She reminded the rest of us sociologists that social environments that prevent people from accessing the “outside” world, that keep them wholly bound up in the insular group, and that prevent others from entering in are dangerous and produce fertile conditions for abuse. And we should have recognized this. For girls and women to be denied the agency afforded by a driver's license, for them to be required to gain prior male approval to seek help (medical or otherwise), and for them to have no formal or powerful role in decision-making is a formula for oppression and abuse. A community without strangers is a dangerous community. When no stranger is permitted in to inspect, observe, advise, or protect, low-status people in “closed” and gated communities are at risk. Strangers provide something essential for a community, whether in the form of police, medical personnel, guidance counselors in high schools, or peers working teen-help hotlines. Just think about how important it is that your doctor—the person who asks you to take off your clothes and put on one of those paper gowns with no back—*shouldn't* be someone in your circle of familiars! And the thing strangers provide is precisely what Georg Simmel develops in a famous sociological essay titled “The Stranger.”¹⁵

Simmel was a German social philosopher who lived from 1858 to 1918. He was interested in the ways that society exists as a number of “social forms” that develop as humans interact with each other. Once established, these social forms exert influence over the individuals who inhabit them. In other words, we humans develop various patterns (which become our institutions), and those patterns or institutions then act back on us in controlling ways. Examples include family, fashion, education, and religion. Simmel wrote on

15. Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms*, 143–49.

a diverse array of topics, and his most important insights center on the inevitable and necessary conflict between the individual and society, or “the group.” He was most interested in the contradictions that existed within, yet also formed the basis for, particular forms of social life. For example, if individual motivations are at the root of most of our social interactions, and if such individualism is of paramount importance, how is society even possible?

Simmel’s now famous excursus develops a typology of the stranger as an individual who is simultaneously an insider and an outsider to the group in which he or she stands. Here’s an example: In the sociology department where I teach, every ten years we are required to invite a sociologist from outside our college to visit us to conduct a comprehensive review of our program. When we invited such a person about five years ago, he came in and spent three or four days at our college. He attended sociology classes, taught a class or two himself, met with administrators, had lunch with students and local alumni, and so on. Why do we do this? Well, for one reason, we are required to do it as a stipulation of our accreditation. But another, more important reason is that it has potential to give us insight into what we are doing—insight that we can’t obtain on our own. I graduated from the college in which I now teach. If people like me run around evaluating the effectiveness of our programs, we will overlook important things because we lack the capacity to be truly objective. An outside reviewer has no (or few) preexisting allegiances to the college or our sociology program, and thus can help us insiders begin to see our blind spots. Here’s the other thing: As this outside reviewer interviewed me (which he did quite extensively), I found myself opening up to him, telling him things that I might not have told my colleagues, and certainly not my administrators. To an outside reviewer—a stranger—with little or no permanent ties to our community, I could reveal my misgivings, places where I questioned parts of our orthodoxy, areas in which I felt inadequate. And he could advise me. Save for the stranger coming into my world, I would have kept my less-than-orthodox thoughts to myself. And in the end, while some of the reviewer’s conclusions prodded a few of our beloved ideas, we gained valuable perspective on ourselves and avoided the easily indulged, group-based tendency toward self-congratulation.

Simmel recognizes the stranger not as idiosyncratic and trivial but as an important feature of a group. The stranger occupies a particular position in a group’s structure. The strangers that Simmel are concerned with are those who come into a group and stay for a while—not just those passing through who have a cup of coffee and move on. Such strangers are “fixed” within the group but not fully committed to it. They have the potential to move on but haven’t done so. Simmel writes, “[The stranger] is, so to speak, the potential wanderer: although he has not moved on, he has not quite overcome the

freedom of coming and going. He is fixed within a particular spatial group, or within a group whose boundaries are similar to spatial boundaries. But his position in this group is determined, essentially, by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the beginning, that he imports qualities into it, which do not and cannot stem from the group itself.”¹⁶ This last part is important. The stranger can offer group members something they cannot acquire on their own. That something is perspective, or objectivity.

Strangers of the sort Simmel writes about are both far and near to those in the group, allowing them to be more objective. As Simmel says, the stranger “is not radically committed to the unique ingredients and peculiar tendencies of the group, and therefore approaches them with the specific attitude of ‘objectivity.’” Simmel provides an example of how it was common in his day for some Italian cities to call their judges from the outside, “because no native was free from entanglement in family and party interests.”¹⁷ Makes sense. We do this sort of thing when we make sure that potential jury members have no ties to or prejudices about the person on trial. Furthermore, Simmel explains, such objectivity can be seen as a kind of freedom in that the stranger isn’t constrained by the group’s particular prejudices and consequently is free to offer an honest opinion on some matter. The stranger owes the group no loyalty to their particular ways of thinking and being. In this way, though not something Simmel mentions, the stranger is more prophet than priest.

Consider the Old Testament prophets. They were frequently (though not always) positioned as strangers to the Israelites—they were coming from the outside and were not usually involved in the day-to-day life of the group. Lacking intimate ties to the group, they could bring a word from the Lord—often a critical word that suggested (or commanded) that the group change its ways or prepare for the consequences. The prophets, partly enabled by their status as outsiders, owed no allegiance to the patterns, loyalties, or shibboleths of the group. For example, the prophet Amos, an outsider who lived in Judah, came to pronounce God’s judgment on Israel (the Northern Kingdom). Speaking for the Lord, Amos says

I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even through you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon. (Amos 5:21–22)

16. Farganis, “Georg Simmel,” 138.

17. Farganis, “Georg Simmel,” 139.

Note Amos's lack of concern for the ways of life that the Israelites have come to adopt and value. He has no entrenchment with the group (Israelites) or attachment to their ways that would prevent him from delivering to them a stern warning from the Lord. Because of his unique position as a stranger on the margins of the group, Amos, like other biblical prophets, could offer valuable insight to the people he addressed—insight unencumbered by material interests and other entanglements that might distort the counsel offered by an insider.

Whether in reference to Old Testament prophets like Amos or prophetic voices that address us today, Simmel's work can help us better understand just how important strangers are to the proper functioning of a group. Accordingly, we should more readily notice when a group has excluded (consciously or otherwise) outsiders from entering group life in meaningful ways. Consider how insular and self-referential churches, governments, colleges, political parties, and armies can become when no stranger is permitted input. How can denominations have their perspective challenged if all theological judgments are made by religious insiders who derive material and social benefits from their monopolies? What happens when a nation permits no other nation to offer outside perspective? And so on. Simmel reminds us not to discount the stranger. For where there are no strangers, there is no prophetic voice. And where the prophets have been excluded, there is no justice.