

# Group Identification and Social Justice

by Stephen Wise

## How groups influence our thinking on justice issues

As human beings we are necessarily part of different groups. Some of these are not chosen, such as our family of origin and birth nationality. Most of them are chosen such as our family by marriage, and our church and other associations. There are rights and responsibilities having to do with each group and they have a direct impact on our justice decisions. We notice this especially with regard to nationality and family but it is also true of our church membership.

When we belong to a group we identify psychologically with it to some degree which has consequences for justice decisions. There is the phenomenon of “GroupThink” which is the tendency to come to a group decision that excludes relevant and significant information, often with a false sense of group invulnerability. An example of this is the war room debates depicted in the movie, “Thirteen Days,” where the cabinet members were not offering any objections to the counsel of the military chiefs which could have started World War III. After the Bay of Pigs disaster which also followed the “GroupThink” model, President Kennedy purposely stayed out of key cabinet meetings so as not to dissuade the cabinet from speaking openly.

Another effect of groups on our thinking is the tendency to “scapegoat”, to place responsibility on persons outside the group. Before Timothy McVeigh became the chief suspect in the Oklahoma Federal Building disaster, many assumed that a Muslim was responsible.

Then there is the less subtle “Good Ol’ Boy Network” influence on our thinking where the need to support members of the group in return for similar support is so strong that we have difficulty acting justly to those who are not a part of the network. Some would say that the G7 economic leaders are such a network. There is also the “herd” mentality that holds that so many people can’t be wrong even when reason clearly shows it. An example of this could be the Allied bombing of civilians in Germany and Japan, which, though popular at the time, defied all accepted standards for morality in warfare.

Most of the time we are not aware in our own thinking process of how these and other effects of group identification are influencing our choices. Very often the preference for the “In-Group” causes our perceptions to be selective. We unconsciously look for data that corresponds to our group assumptions, and overlook data that does not correspond. For example, people with a racial prejudice will remember every incidence of violence by the prejudiced population.

It takes a conscious, determined effort to overcome the effects of group bias on one’s decisions. At the very least, it presupposes a desire to think independently of the group.

This paper will consider primarily the effects that our group memberships of nationality, family, and church have on our social justice decisions. When we get together to discuss foreign policy is there American “GroupThink” going on? (Are we listening to the voices of other countries that object to our foreign policy?) Do we notice all the misdeeds that members of other religions are accused of and excuse those of our own? Would we have the same opinion of the Iraq war if we were a citizen of Iraq living there? Do I have a responsibility for taking care of the members of my family, or for someone on the street?

The effects of groups on our justice decisions are not all bad. In fact, one cannot act for justice effectively without some kind of group involvement. Groups can encourage us, inform us, and allow for joint actions. Acting justly involves identifying with the groups that favor justice and maintaining an independent stance regarding the unjust positions of others. One could also take a prophetic stand within an unjust group. Effective social justice work can be done within groups that have a potential to do good but require a prophetic voice such as ours to get them to do it.

- *What groups do I belong to? What are their characteristics? What are my responsibilities to them?*
- *How does my identification in national and church groups influence my opinions on justice?*

## Critical Thinking

Many of the skills needed to counteract the negative effects of groups in justice decisions can be placed under the category of “Critical Thinking” skills, which enable us to achieve a measure of independence from group influences in our decision making by making our decision based on well-considered values and sound reasoning with an accurate view of the reality of the situation in question. But decisions based on the will of the group are not likely to preserve the values, rationality, or factuality of the situation; making it unlikely that justice is accomplished.

Critical Thinking allows us to think independently of groups because its allegiance is to openness to new information and being reasonable. It is the bridge of peace that connects all men because by focusing on these core allegiances, contrary positions can be worked out to the satisfaction of everyone without resorting to “might makes right” imperialism.

Critical Thinking requires awareness of one’s emotional states, feelings, and desires because these are the raw material of decision-making. It seeks to affirm the values represented by our desires while integrating them into a choice that implements some of these desires but not others. It requires intelligence related to values and calculating the probabilities involved. It also requires strength of will to carry out what we have decided we should do. These skills of emotions, intellect, and will are necessary for making just decisions that all people can respect.

But the necessary starting point for critical thinking is a desire to think independently of one’s groups. For many people, this has too many negative consequences such as isolation from the group, loss of status in the group, and loss of one’s own identity as derived from the group. These negative consequences are the result of not understanding that the best people don’t just do what they are told but think critically in constructive ways. A healthy group is composed of independent individuals, not parts out of the same mold.

- *Which of the elements of Critical Thinking do I use in my decisions on justice?*

## Personal Maturity and Individuation

Individuation is a term that describes the psychological state of a mature person who has achieved a degree of interdependence with the groups with which she is associated, primarily the family. One of the characteristics of group psychology is that we identify with groups to a greater or lesser extent resulting in an identity or sense of self that is bound to that group.

If a person is not individuated from the group in question, an attack on or even criticism of the group is taken personally. When others question some group policy, the group member responds with a “Love it or leave it” attitude. Without the ability or perhaps freedom to critique the group, members contribute little and become part of the reason for the group’s problems.

A person who is not individuated from the group is not able to deal with the conflicting values represented by different groups. Without individuation, there is no psychological center apart from the groups a person belongs to, resulting in an inability to exercise critical thinking regarding the different justice issues corresponding to those diverse values. The end result is giving up on exercising any critical judgment regarding issues such as giving money, acting instead according to the feelings of the moment.

Individuation is not the same thing as independence. No person is, strictly speaking, entirely independent from others. If one tries to rebel from one’s family of origin or other group by distancing oneself from it, the end result is perpetuating the same characteristics of the group that was disagreeable to begin with. Individuation, then, is the result of working through the issues one has with one’s family of origin or other group to achieve a psychological center that is separate but not distanced from the groups of which one is a member. It is developed along with a strong sense of self that has an identity apart from the group. The individuated person is then able to work for justice within the groups he is apart of, and find and start new groups. Counseling that aids individuation works with critical thinking to make just decisions possible.

- *What do my family relationships tell me about my state of individuation from my family?*

## Groups and Spiritual Discernment

Spiritual discernment complements the roles of individuation and critical thinking in dealing with the negative effects of groups on justice decisions. A spiritual guide can help a person discover the spiritual impact that groups are having on a person's thinking and feeling. The Spiritual Exercises can help a person explore the role of possessions in a person's life.

4 elements of the Exercises that enable this to happen are: The First Principle and Foundation, Ways of Making a Decision, Discernment of Spirits, and Dialogue with Jesus.

The First Principle and Foundation is a call to justice. It reads:

"The (other) things on the face of the earth are created for man to help him in attaining the end for which he is created (serving God). Hence, man is to make use of them in as far as they help him in the attainment of his end (serving God), and he must rid himself of them in as far as they prove a hindrance to him. Therefore, we must make ourselves indifferent to all created things.... we should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honor to dishonor, a long life to a short life."

This radical commitment to the divine and radical indifference to possessions of all kinds is a theme echoed by all the great world religions. This is the key to good morals, psychological health, and spiritual fulfillment and it is the cornerstone of justice. It shows the linkage between love of the God we don't see and love of our neighbor we do see. Spiritual discernment based on this principle allows one to discover how one's group involvements are impacting justice.

The Exercises have two tools to help a person deal with both thoughts and feelings and the spiritual ramifications of groups. The first is a way of making a choice which includes writing down the pros and cons of a decision followed by prayerful reflection, thereby integrating prayer with more intellectual thought processes. The second is the rules for discernment of spirits based on awareness of one's feelings and, using Jesus as a guidepost, noting in what direction the feelings take us. Finally, the Spiritual Exercises emphasizes a method of prayer centered on the life of Jesus and dialogue with Jesus. Such prayer can attune us to the Holy Spirit of Jesus so that a sense of justice becomes a guide for all our decisions.

- *What spiritual discernment do I engage in on justice issues?*