Silence and dialogue

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The act of being silent is not a proof of ignorance or of having nothing to say, of being ‘dumb’. On the contrary, as this article wishes to explain, it is an essential aspect of dialogue.

“Dialogue involves both having something substantial to say and being willing to listen in depth. The participants want to hear the authentic tradition which has been really experienced and is truly lived.”

The command to listen
The shema of the Jewish faith reads as follows:

“Listen, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord. You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, and with your whole soul, and with your whole strength.” (Deut 6.4-5)

The doctrinal element, “the Lord our God is one Lord”, is followed by its ethical consequence, “You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart …” but the primary command is ‘Listen’ (shema in Hebrew) which in turn calls for silence.

The shema is given by Moses at that liminal moment when the People of God are about to enter into the Land promised to Abraham and his descendants. However, Moses anticipates that the people will not listen and will in fact be exiled from the Land in consequence.

Likewise, in the Christian tradition, at that liminal moment when Jesus begins to speak about his death the Voice comes from heaven saying “Listen to him” (Mt 9.8). But Christians have too often not listened to the teaching of their Moses.

Entering into silence:
The command to listen is a hard lesson to learn. It means turning a deaf ear to the desires and ambitions and unresolved conflicts that resound in the heart. It is a moment of purification.

Even more, it means becoming vulnerable. Rabbi Yona Metzger, during his visit to Australia some years ago when he was Chief Rabbi of Israel, put the question: why is Moses commanded, in the scene at the Burning Bush (Ex 3 ff.) to remove his shoes? He gave his answer: one can approach the Divine Glory only by removing the protective layers and becoming sensitive.

However, this is easier said than done. Those who experience a deep trauma become both hypersensitive and desensitized at the same time. They are focused on their pain and cannot feel the pain of others. They are deafened. If they are to enter into dialogue, they must be free of the fear and apprehension. This especially the case if they wish to dialogue with those whom have caused the trauma.

1 Promoting Interfaith Relations. Guidelines for the parishes and agencies of the Archdiocese of Melbourne to assist in the promotion of interfaith relations in general and especially in the preparation of interfaith gatherings. Revised edition. The first edition of these Guidelines was officially launched by Archbishop Denis J. Hart, 21 August, 2007. This revised edition was approved by the Archbishop on 12 October, 2009.
The act of listening also involved detachment, of which Abraham is the prime example. He is told to “Leave your country, your family and your father’s house, for the land I will show you.” (Gen 12.1.) – which are the first words in the ‘history of salvation’ (Heilsgeschichte) as distinct from the all-important myths of Genesis 1-11 – and he hearkens without demur.

The act of listening to the other is an act of courage and confidence. It means abandoning tribalism and xenophobia. It is possible only for those who are so confident that they can, without fear of losing their self-identity, listen to others proclaim their identity. Abraham is the model of such confidence. Yet we recoil from this entry into the unknown. We prefer to stay in the comfort zone of the familiar, ‘our own country’.

The act of listening intently means abandoning the assumption that the other is wrong and uninspired. It involves a presumption of truth in the other. As St Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556 CE) says in the ‘Presupposition’ of his famous Spiritual Exercises

 “… let it be presupposed that every good Christian is to be more ready to save his neighbour’s proposition than to condemn it. If he cannot save it, let him inquire how he means it …..”

But it is difficult to listen to another’s teaching for it implies that one’s own faith, at least one’s own understanding of it, might be inadequate. This provokes fear which in turn leads to the wish to silence the other. This silencing has been done in a myriad of ways, most spectacularly by the burning of books and the suppression of free speech, but more subtly through by mockery and satire, by misrepresentation and false portrayal, even by ‘political correctness’. This suppression of the other is accompanied by ever more exaggerated and intrusive presentations of one’s own point of view. We effectively say to each other. “Listen here to me!”

I personally feel that we have reached an impasse in dialogue. People seem willing to proclaim their own faith but block their ears against other points of view. We have become merely polite.

“And yet true dialogue is not mere civility. Interfaith dialogue involves humility and openness to the spiritual depths of other faiths. It takes place in confidence, without fear or arrogance, without dominating or glossing over differences, never excluding or patronising, neither assimilating nor ignoring.

It requires participants to dialogue with respect, not necessarily in agreement; it invites them to acknowledge that what is heard may indeed proceed from the depths of the Divine Mystery. It does not preclude robust debate if this is done with courtesy and without antagonism, but is based on a spirituality of communion and a commitment to a practical concern for every human being.”

If refuse to listen, our supposed dialogue becomes a dialogue of the deaf, where everyone is speaking and no-one is listening. In fact we are busy listening to ourselves and miss the essential truth the other is speaking. We enter a state of ‘sin’ in the sense of the Greek word for sin, hamartia, which means ‘to miss the mark’. We miss out on the other’s truth which is God’s truth, for all truth is of God.

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3 Promoting Interfaith Relations.
In the area of interfaith, the act of listening is an acknowledgment that the other may have something revelatory to say to us. It is the admission that one’s understanding of the divine message needs to be enhanced by what has been divinely revealed to the other. Thus it is a mark of deep respect. Any other attitude is just civility which in the end is extremely insulting because it asserts ever so subtly that the other not been touched by the hand of God and has nothing valuable to contribute.

But if God is speaking in the other, silence is required, for the only attitude that is proper in the presence of the Divine is silence. To speak at that moment would be impudence. Thus, for example, when the glory of God is revealed in the formation of the first woman (Gen 2.21), when covenant is made with Abraham (Gen 15.12), when the smoke fills the temple of Solomon (1 Kg 8.10-13), when Elijah comes to Mount Horeb (I Kg 19.13), the protagonists fall asleep or fall silent. This is because the ordinary faculties can no longer function. Similarly, in the presence of the other who is about to contribute some element of truth, the only attitude is the hush of reverence, knowing that the other is in some sense prophetic.

The theme of silence is central to the Christian tradition. It occurs at the beginning and end of Jesus’ life, for example. Thus, when Mary of Nazareth hears the herald’s cry of the angel “Rejoice” (Lk 1.28) she hears it with her entire being: not only with her mind and heart but bodily as well and so she conceives the Word of God, Jesus, whom Christians call ‘the Christ’. At the end of his life Jesus is reduced to silence, rejected by everyone, seemingly even by the One who sent him. Christians acknowledge him as both divine and human; they teach that he knows both the height and the depth, that he is Light and yet enters into the ultimate darkness, that he is the “Holy One of God” (Jn 6.69) and yet is made into sin (2 Cor. 5.21): they teach that in this moment of paradox where all the contraries meet the full revelation of God is made. It is the folly of the cross. (I Cor 1.23)

By means of this “folly” Christians are taken beyond the senses and beyond the mind, to a new form of awareness. They move beyond the realm of discourse and move into the mysterium fidei and come into the ineffable presence of God.

Silence is found in the Catholic ritual also. After the Introductory Rites of the Mass which purify the soul and prepare the heart, the congregation take their seat and listen to the Sacred Text. Only the silent heart can hear. As St John of the Cross, the great mystic of 16th century Spain, says “God … speaks the Word … in eternal silence, and in silence the soul hears it”\(^4\). The climax of the Mass is the reception of the Consecrated Food, after which there is a time of ‘sacred silence’. All has been done; we come to rest in that divine silence from which all springs.

Silence and the act of listening are essential to the Christian and Jewish traditions. Silence of this sort prepares for the work of interreligious dialogue.

**Earning the right to speak**

It goes both ways, of course. Those who presuppose a divine truth in the other earn the right to speak their own truth. Because they are willing to listen, they deserve to be heard.

Last January I was travelling with a group of young people from Russia, Ukraine and Latvia who follow the Natha tradition, an ancient tradition of India. We were on our way to the kumbhamela, an event which occurs every twelve years at the confluence of the Ganges and Jumna rivers at Allahabad where millions upon millions bathe in the sacred waters. They were an impressive group, dedicated and happy, travelling with their guru, a young Russian, called Yogi Matsyendranath. They knew I was a Catholic priest. I was struck by their

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commitment and listened to what they had to say. This in turn impressed them. One night, in a small town on the Nepalese border where no foreign tourists ever go, they asked me about the Christian faith, wanting to know what I thought about Jesus, about the varieties of truth, about the Church, God, the Canon of Scripture, eternal life etc. etc. Because I was willing to listen to them they were willing to listen to me.

Our expectant silence allows others to speak their truth. We can perceive the truth because our minds and wills, our actions and lives, are free from the hindrance of inner noise. The interior ‘static’ has been removed and we can hear clearly at last.

This does not imply naivety, as though anything anyone says is to be valued. Discernment is needed, which comes from the perception of one’s own truth. Having earned the right to speak, we exchange our thoughts, and give witness to what has moved us profoundly. It is the stage of putting into words that which is beyond words.

**Coming to the heart**

Paradox is at the heart of interreligious dialogue for the contrasting theologies cannot be resolved by mental constructs. God cannot be boxed into the categories of our mind, despite all attempts to do so. God is beyond control. The systems are irreducible one to the other.

Far from being an obstacle to faith, the diversity of views in interreligious dialogue enables us to perceive the Divine more truly. It is like having two ears. We can hear a sound with just one ear, but with two ears we can also perceive the direction of the sound. Because we have two eyes we can see in depth. Diversity gives greater perception.

To listen to the other is to be willing to enter into the paradox of irreconcilable diversity. It is the apophatic moment, the moment of silence, when words are powerless to express the fullness of glory that is perceived. Perception is needed. By divine grace we are able to see.

In prophetic literature, the ‘coming of the Lord’, the momentous revelation, is often heralded by silence, as in Apocalypse 8.1 which states: “and when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven, as it were for half an hour”.

Dialogue consists finally, not in exchanging ideas of which there are a million new ones every day, but in becoming aware of the very heart of the other and thereby coming into the Divine Presence. It creates space; it revels in an openness of mind and an eagerness to listen to the deepest dearest truths. When the interlocutors do this, there is communion. Then a greater unity is discovered. As Teilhard de Chardin says again and again in his writings, “unity brings about diversity” (l’union différencie). The one God brings about diversity.

After all these words about silence it is time … to be silent.

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