

Dialogue: "Holy Insecurity"

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The war in Bosnia and the particularly tragic example of Sarajevo evoke the mournful question: What does it take for people of different traditions to live together in peace? It is part of our modern condition that we are surprised again and again—sadly and bitterly surprised—to learn that peace is not necessarily secured by living together in communities and neighborhoods, nor even in marriages.

We learned this before when the Jews of pre-World War II Europe, like the inhabitants of Sarajevo, mistakenly believed that shared community identity, intercultural commerce, intermarriage, and the rules of civility were sufficient ingredients for peace. To them, too, it was an enormous shock (despite the presence of continued anti-Semitism) to have their neighbors turn against them, even against those who had embraced their neighbors' faith. The Holocaust has been attributed, in part, to the failure of Jewish emancipation. It might be more broadly read as an example of one of the many failings of modernity. Sarajevo is another instance.

The particular aspect of modernity to which I refer is the modern belief that peace relies simply on the goodwill of people toward one another, goodwill that is based on an appreciation for the individual. Though the modernist position espoused tolerance, it was tolerance based on "sameness," as postmodernism has made clear. "I will treat you with respect, because you are an individual—like me—and only as long as you are 'like me.'" When the assumed but unspoken clause, "like me," or "like the majority culture" is exposed, so too is the feebleness of the connection that obtains in spite of our differences, rather than in relation to them. Such "tolerance" is too closely related to the inclusive form of absolutism, where the worth of another tradition is affirmed only insofar as it corresponds to the one completely true faith.

Theoretically, modernity bracketed out religious convictions and made an argument for equality on the basis of a universal reason. The promise was that all are equal without regard to their religious beliefs. But in actual fact, religion did not disappear as a dividing point between people. In the case of Western European Jews, what became invisible was not religion in general, but their particular Jewishness. Equality was not the birthright given by reason to humanity. Instead it was the gift of the majority culture to the minority, on the condition that the minority embrace secularism—or better yet,

baptism. One of the failures of modernity is that it did not live up to its promise to respect individuals as truly individual.

It is easy to live well with those who are like us. The challenge lies, as the poet Wendell Berry notes, in doing "something that won't compute," in loving "someone who does not deserve it," in giving "approval to all you cannot understand (Roberts and Amidon 1991, 122-23). This requires a move beyond the belief system of modernity, to a place where the individual is loved in all of his or her remarkable singularity, and not as representative of a particular form of universality. One of the challenges for people in a postmodern era is to acknowledge the profusion of qualities that distinguishes one individual from another, including religion, and yet to give respect to another. This requires real dialogue about differences, dialogue that is potentially transformative of its participants who, having encountered value outside of their own home, feel compelled to reshape their personal convictions. We have begun to understand that unexamined lives are vulnerable lives, vulnerable to the neighbor who is ignorant, indifferent, or arrogant.

When "two people of very deep faith" choose to "listen attentively and empathetically to the other's sharing of faith" dialogue begins. But the kind of dialogue that pushes beyond tolerance and even beyond appreciation of the other, the kind of dialogue that leads to transformative understanding, requires more than attentiveness and empathy, though these are essential. Mary Boys and Sara Lee have named a number of additional characteristics, as have Leonard Swidler and other important voices in interreligious dialogue. At the risk of being repetitive, but for the purpose of emphasizing the strenuous nature of transformative dialogue, I will set out some of the psychological and metaphysical assumptions that enable such dialogues to occur.

Psychological and Metaphysical Perspectives on Dialogue

From the perspective of a process metaphysics, it is in the nature of things to change. Since transformation is ongoing and unavoidable, when any two people meet, change will occur regardless of what is said or not. But change *consciously* chosen—the willingness to be transformed when confronted with certain propositions, events, or presences—is indispensable to transformative dialogue. Among people who are religiously committed, the "willingness to be transformed" is perhaps the affective side of commitment to a power greater than themselves that in its fullness they acknowledge to be beyond their complete comprehension. The admission that God, truth, beauty, or love might play a more extensive role in the world than one has experienced for oneself and that there are thus creative outcomes that one has not yet experienced, leads to an openness to new propositions and to inquiry rather than certitude.

Because of this initial commitment to an authority that transcends the individual's full knowledge, it is, I think, possible even for absolutists to enter a dialogical relationship. If they listen attentively and empathetically to one another *and* with a sustained

awareness of the unlimited nature of ultimacy (and their own limited understanding of it), then there is the opening for real dialogue.

As Boys and Lee emphasize, the "presence" of the other is a crucial element of interreligious learning. But "presence" alone is not sufficient. Dialogue requires a particular quality, a "felt presence," as it were. To borrow the terms of Martin Buber, the other who is experienced as "Thou" is not accidental to me, not simply a curiosity—that which I am not—but a possibility—that which I might become. In such an encounter, both persons are subjects and yet both are "for-each-other"; there are no Its. Thus, even in their "objectivity," in their being "for-each-other," both persons are perceived as "subjects." In this kind of meeting, in the presence of the other who is perceived as "Thou," we find the possibility of dialogue that deepens both our own subjectivity and our internal relatedness.

Participants in the Catholic-Jewish Colloquium drew upon the virtues of courage, honesty, generosity, and patience as they engaged in a dialogue. All of these are important conditions for transformative dialogue but especially courage—courage to be honest, generous, patient and, above all, vulnerable. For there is a great deal of risk involved in dialogue that is potentially transformative. In putting forward our beliefs and values for scrutiny and in opening ourselves to another world view, we become vulnerable to ourselves and our communities. It takes courage to enter the process, courage to redefine ourselves in response to new insights, courage to "side" at times with another tradition, courage to find ourselves sometimes marginalized in our own traditions. It leads, as one participant noted, "on a journey that has no script and that is really frightening. . . and that on some basic level you understand [as] recrafting a whole sense of self." For such courage to be manifested, participants in dialogue must hold an abiding belief that something really important is at stake.

Transformative dialogue can be simultaneously destabilizing and strengthening. To be thrown "off center" can be strengthening when the ego is marginalized and the ultimate returned to centrality, or when the "stability" that is revoked had been conservative, unresponsive, and narrow. If by "strengthened" we mean "made more alive," then the person who in dialogue becomes more open, sensitive, and aware is indeed strengthened. Yet at the same time, that person is made more fragile. If the goal of religious traditions is not impenetrability or indestructibility, but receptivity to truth and beauty, then it is the tender strength of the butterfly, not the stone, that is to be valued.

Increased openness, sensitivity and awareness cannot be confined; in opening ourselves to one person in dialogue, we open ourselves to many. One of the most important consequences of dialogue is that there is no exclusivity of relationships; the change that occurs in one relationship is generalized so that we are never the same in our meetings with others. In crossing one barrier, we cross many. Part of "what happens" in dialogue is that the meaning that arises becomes part of our interpretation of life beyond the particular moment of dialogue.

What we learn is added to our other efforts to understand the whole of life. In this sense dialogue is a "meaning-making" enterprise. It is a significant means by which we verify our own realities as well as enlarge upon them. If, as Victor Frankl held, the "will to meaning" is part of our psychological makeup, our encounter with the other is part of our journey to wholeness.

Perhaps the most destabilizing possibility inherent in transformative dialogue is that it may give rise to the question about the "essence" of our traditions of faith. In dialogue we do not simply open ourselves to new truths or new interpretations of truth, or to ideas that are not now present in our traditions or are present in different forms. We also open ourselves to the need to develop new patterns of explanation, values, behavior, language and liturgy. How much can we restructure our traditions before they are no longer our traditions, but something new and something else? What are the boundaries beyond which we cannot cross and still call ourselves Jews or Christians? There are some who, as a result of their experience of dialogue, will reach the conclusion that there is no essential core to a religious tradition. John B. Cobb, Jr., the well-known Christian theologian argues for such an understanding of Christianity; for many, his words are unsettling:

Christianity has no essence. There is no doctrine, no set of values, no way of life, no ecclesiastical practice, no mode of being in the world, that defines what Christianity always and at all places must be. Christianity is a living community that has its identity from remembering a shared history. But which features of that history are emphasized, how they are interpreted, what implications are drawn from them—all changes (Cobb 1996, 233).

The idea that there is no essence to a particular religion is a destabilizing revelation. In our desire to define ourselves we tend to value the substantial over the transient, the enduring over the momentary. Identity gets entangled with security, so much so that we give more attention to the elements of stability than to the elements of novelty in our lives. But dialogue shifts the emphasis from fixity to change.

For people "of very deep faith" who enter into dialogue, perhaps the most strenuous part of the process comes when we ask what we are to do with the insights we have gained, how we are to incorporate them into our lives and yet remain faithful to our traditions. Having learned that another's tradition is not clearly more flawed than our own, having recognized the depth and diversity within another tradition, and having sensed the power of another tradition and the great possibilities for goodness that might and do come from it, what are we now to do? Having begun to read history from another direction, having become sensitive to the language of those in our tradition who disparage the other, having begun to critically examine our own tradition in response to our encounter with another tradition, where will our learning take us? We cannot necessarily recommit to our previous religious understanding or to our home congregations, and this can be the cause of pain and isolation. We find that we have to reshape our traditions in a way that perhaps has not been done before and we ask anew, "What are the boundaries that define our tradition?"

We cannot look to the modern world view for help in this regard, with its emphasis on enduring objects as most real and its definition of the individual as a being who is fundamentally independent of the rest of the world. Instead we must renew our affirmation of the social nature of all life, reverse the Aristotelian science that says that relations are secondary and affirm instead that we are constituted by our relations. We must remember with Whitehead that "the art of persistence is to be dead" (Whitehead 1958, 4). We must value our experiences of interconnectedness and novelty that come to us in a heightened form in dialogue with another.

The idea of replacing "essence" with "relation" and "process" can be deeply disorienting. Indeed, disorientation is a part of any creative process. But if our commitment is to a power greater than our selves that cannot be contained either in our intellectual or religious constructs and we experience in dialogue evidence of this power, we can find ourselves profoundly rededicated to our newly understood faith. We may recommit ourselves in faith to the responsive God who calls for response, to the creative acts of God and others in the world, to relationships with God and all others whose vitality must be encountered anew at each moment. It is this kind of recommitment that invigorates our traditions. But it also leads to what Buber terms "holy insecurity" (Friedman 1976). The price that we pay for responsiveness and creativity is a loss of security. Religion is not only a cradle in which we calm our fears but a way of participating in the creativity that surrounds and infuses us and, yes, confuses us. Though we deeply desire security—of knowledge, of continued life, of love—it cannot be ours except paradoxically as we embrace creativity and its source. Dialogue with people of different faiths heightens the ambiguity in our lives because it is part and parcel of the creative action that defines life itself.

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