

True Listening

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Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 2, No.4. (Autumn 1968) © World Wisdom, Inc.
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On the breaking of the Bread, Thou are not broken, nor art Thou divided.

St. Thomas Aquinas
Sermon of the Body of Our Lord

"Why is it that true listening is a faculty of only a few? Why is it that so often so-called dialogues are but a collection of monologues conducted with closed ears and hearts?" Kraemer:

"The Communication of the Christian Faith."

WHILE not attempting to answer Kraemer's question in any full sense we would like to indicate some of the problems involved in our attempt as Christians to enter into fruitful dialogue with the scientific thought of the west and the metaphysical doctrines of the east. In this connection at least part of the answer to the question is to be found in the fact that many of us try to both speak and listen without any clear understanding as to what we mean by words like science, metaphysic, revelation, religion and many others. Much of the conflict in the world today between great historic cultures and traditions, and much of the difficulty of arriving at mutual understanding in depth arises from this cause. It would be fair comment to say that this is the case often even when eminent and deeply sincere authorities in various fields are engaged in the attempt to enter into true understanding. There is not rarely a fundamental lack of clarity in the use of words, which results in a deepening confusion and inability to communicate. In many cases it seems as though the underlying structures of consciousness deny even the possibility of understanding modes of thinking and living and being alien to our own. Yet often this seeming incapacity arises from a defect of the will conditioned below the surface consciousness.

In what follows an attempt is made to clear away some of the misunderstandings that arise whenever we approach these problems. The purpose is to stimulate discussion while remaining if possible clear as to the meaning of the terms we are using.

This being so it is necessary to attempt definitions of some words fundamental to the discussion and to accept these definitions as valid at least within the framework of the present study.

1. Revelation is that which establishes in truth man's relation to that which transcends process.
2. Religion is the attempt to incorporate revelation in cultural and historical forms, i.e., in process.
3. Metaphysic is the attempt to arrive at knowledge of that which transcends process.
4. Science in its pure form, which is all we are here concerned with, is the attempt to arrive

at knowledge of the laws governing process.

These definitions, though very generalized and abstract, are sufficient for our present purpose, and it is clear that if we accept them there is in principle no conflict between them. It is also clear that they involve each other in the sense that each needs the others to establish itself in its own fullness and integrity. This mutual need and interdependence is the necessary consequence of the presence in each case of what we have called "process," which is that in the structure of the world which is constantly moving and changing. A complete and authentic tradition would be achieved by a balanced fusion of all four elements in which each remained true to itself without distorting the others. There are however in the world elements arising from the facts of process, freedom and evil which forever prevent this achievement "under heaven." Yet the necessity lies upon us always to be striving towards its realization.

Certain consequences implicit in the definitions given above, when taken together as constituting a description of an authentic tradition considered in its totality, should be noted. Revelation—the Word—in its source prehuman and transcendent, and as such inaccessible without grace, which is an eternal outflow of divine creativity and mercy into the temporal world, is in principle both complete in itself, and that which enters into, completes and renders authentic our religious and metaphysical and scientific strivings. This means we must clearly recognise that revelation is present in all human activities in so far as they participate in truth at any level. In examining any particular traditional form, however, we become aware of certain distortions, certain impeding and negative elements, certain irruptions of evil.

The distortions will usually arise from a lack of balance induced in the form by the powerful influence of the central human tendency in the collectivity concerned. Thus we see in the eastern traditions the strong urge to pure metaphysical realisation has tended to weaken the other factors which are nevertheless present. We see in the modern west the striving towards scientific understanding and control of process resulting in an almost complete discounting of the metaphysical order, and a grave weakening of the religious culture. In ecclesiastical Christianity, as it took form in the middle-ages, the religious cultus almost obliterated the scientific perspective. In Islam the emphasis on divine transcendence has made it difficult for Muslims to realise the divine immanence: to this the fate of Hallaj bears witness.

The impeding and negative elements present in all historic forms arise from the obscurity and weight of the human substance involved, and inhibiting historical, geographical and climatic factors.

The irruptions of evil break forth under the pressure of satanic forces present in the world which can by no means be discounted in the light of revelation or of history.

The point we are making here is that all historic forms without exception show such failures and ambiguities and all fall short of the glory of God.

Against this general background we now consider some of the implications of our understanding of revelation in relation to the great historic traditions of man. Revelation in so far as it is essentially and supremely that which establishes in truth man's relation to the transcendent is clearly manifested in all its divine fullness in Christ. This is so because metaphysic and science as such are not in principle centred on man. Pure metaphysic seeks as it were to forget man in order to realize the transcendent, though in practice it is always forced to take man into account. Pure science likewise seeks to forget man except in so far as he is involved in process—for science is by its very nature centred upon achieving an understanding of process. If accepted

these considerations force us to see in Christ the fullness of revelation. This will also mean that all religious forms are in fact centred on Christ whether manifest or "hidden," and can only be properly understood in the light of Christ. This will not mean that historic "Christian" forms are necessarily more filled with the spirit of Christ than others. Christ Himself infinitely transcends any and every historic form and all alike lie under His judgment and mercy. Yet in so far as Christianity is more consciously and decisively centred on Jesus of Nazareth the incarnate Christ, it should and possibly does reflect His grace out into the world in a more abundant way than other religions. It should not need saying that this possibility in no way implies any cultural superiority in a "Christian" civilization which is in fact far from centred on Christ. There remains too the tragic paradox—and this is a fact never to be forgotten—that the manifest presence of Christ always attracts attack from the forces of evil in forms more intense and malignant than those assailing the "hidden" and universal presence of Christ in all human societies. Such demonic forces are not only a source of acute danger and suffering to the "non-Christian" world, but it may well be that only with the help of all the spiritual resources present in that world will the "Christian" world overcome the evil at work within itself. It may be also that only in accepting this help will we come to a true understanding of what the coming of Christ into the world means with all that it implies.

To turn next to the far eastern traditions. It cannot be too clearly understood that these traditions are centred in the metaphysical perspective and that in them the religious striving as such is subordinated to the metaphysical aim of pure knowledge of the transcendent. Yet to seek to understand these doctrines as rational speculative systems of thought comparable to the systems of western philosophers in which discursive reasoning processes play a predominant part, is to misunderstand their nature. The basic teachings are to be understood rather as descriptions of spiritual states arrived at as a result of highly developed disciplines and modes of contemplation, and such discursive reasoning as appears is a subordinate and secondary rationalization of achieved states of consciousness. The basic striving underlying the techniques used is always in the direction of achieving an ever more radical exteriorization of and detachment from process, and the aim is to realize the pure subject underlying all process. To the radically objectified structure of consciousness of the majority of western men such an aim is so baffling as to approach for them something close to complete unintelligibility. This is indicated by the widespread and persistent attempt by many western thinkers, both philosophical and religious, to interpret oriental metaphysic as analagous to western mysticism. This attempt breaks down on the fact that this mysticism reveals an objectified structure of consciousness in accordance with the general objectification of the western mind in all its forms. The mystic sees God as the absolute object and seeks union with God through modes of striving essentially devotional. The eastern sage seeks to realize the absolute subject through techniques of concentration and abstraction from process that are essentially intellectual. The faculty used is an intellectual intuition that increasingly divests itself of process and therefore cannot be identified even in a qualified sense with either discursive reasoning or devotional relationship. The contemplative intelligence seeking to realize within itself the eternity of the transcendent intellect is not surrendering itself to "individualism and arrogance." The pure subject is the transcendent, universal and divine intellect, and the individual in approaching it must needs rid himself of all notions he may have of any special value in himself as an individual. He is no more reasonably to be accused of "individualism and arrogance" than the man who wearying of indoors walks out into the light of the sun. The basic difference in orientation between mystic and sage reveals itself clearly in the typical modes of expression used by say a mystic of the stature of Boehme as

compared with those used by the Buddhist Nagarjuna or the Hindu Shankara.

The state of consciousness achieved by the sage, or its value for the whole of the spiritual world within which he lives and moves and has his being, cannot be participated in, or understood or judged by men of alien traditions whose whole structure of consciousness would have to be, as it were, dismantled before they could even begin to move towards the possibility of sharing in it in some remote degree. This being so it would be wiser to suspend all attempts at judgments issuing in denials that such modes of spiritual striving can be a response to a true inward revelation comparable in value to objective revelation in history as understood in the Semitic traditions. The insistence of many Christian theologians that oriental traditions are purely immanent and are not related to any inner source of revelation or flow of grace can only arise from misunderstanding or a perverse wilfulness. To speak in terms intelligible within the Christian tradition which should be acceptable to these theologians, it must be said that their judgments as to where and under what conditions the Holy Spirit can or cannot move are presumptuous and reveal a surprising lack of humility in the face of divine mysteries. Christ mediates grace through the Holy Spirit to all men when and where He wills to do so, and if He mediates it in ways unseen and through traditional forms strange to men nurtured in Semitic religious traditions then let such men remember His words: "In my Father's house are many mansions"; "other sheep I have which are not of this fold"; "the wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is everyone that is born of the Spirit." Christians also face offences and stones of stumbling in the way to Truth.

We will now consider the influence and meaning of science in so far as it penetrates sometimes as a disturbing and distorting factor and sometimes as a corrective factor into our general religious and cultural situation. Science in that it seeks a position of ever greater detachment from process in order to examine it with a cool and discerning eye remains an ever-necessary sanative influence in dispelling sentimentality and superstition. With a fearless and uninhibited gaze it strives to see the process as it is and refuses to be deflected by non-scientific presuppositions of any kind. This is all to the good and unless it remains present as an element in our thinking we are always liable to fall into subjective fantasies. This remains the greatest service science has rendered us. Unhappily however the intense preoccupation of the scientific outlook with process increasingly induces an incapacity for either genuine metaphysical insight or religious response to revelation, which uncorrected leads to an extremely dangerous blindness and naiveté outside the purely scientific field. That a society predominantly in the grip of such limited thought-forms inevitably finds itself in acute danger and a state of threatening disintegration hardly needs stressing at the present time. In so far as the Western world today reveals this extremely dangerous imbalance in its structures and strivings in favour of the scientific perspective—and it must be acknowledged this imbalance affects not only secular society but also and equally the religious tradition—then it is clear that the eastern metaphysical traditions could be the source for us of a desperately needed corrective. In fact it is not too much to affirm that not until we accept this corrective will we attain to a true and sane understanding of the limitations of science and be in a position to deal with the dangers arising from its misuse. In connection with this necessity it is significant that some eminent scientific men are displaying an interest in and understanding of the eastern traditions which reveals an instinctive turning in the right direction for the corrective they need. Equally it is clear that many orientals have become acutely conscious of the distortions produced in their societies by their predominantly metaphysical bent and of the high price they have had to pay for this at the sociological level,

and are consequently seeking to assimilate emphases from western traditions both scientific and religious which will help them achieve a truer balance.

In one direction—that of cosmology—both modern science and eastern metaphysical doctrines pose problems for Christian theology that have not yet in any profound sense been faced. Christian thinkers need to take more seriously the words of St. Paul: "For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead." The customary evasive talk of one unique world with a beginning and an end neatly fitted to the notions of so many of our theologians in no way disposes of the infinity of worlds endlessly flowing from the infinite creativity of God. The truth is that this "one-unique-world" theology is more or less adequate only in a strictly limited sense as applied to this particular world of man, and the Biblical revelation is a revelation to this particular world. To say this is not to deny the full divinity of Christ or the absolute validity of His revelation, for this revelation is at one with revelation as it must be to any possible world which cannot be other than centred on God through the second Person of the Trinity. In this matter Christian theology must sooner or later come to terms with a cyclical cosmology understood as the reflection in creation of the hidden cyclic inner infinities of the Godhead. "For the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, even the deep things of God."

Surely even the few brief glances we have taken here at the problems before us reveal the need for true humility and true listening among us all whether we be scientists or theologians, western men or eastern men, unbelievers or Christians?

Christians especially must ever be open to receive the unsearchable riches of Christ's grace as revealed in the neighbour that lives outside the radiations of His grace as inwardly received through faith in the historic traditions of Christianity.