

Dialogue – Openness to Others and to the Truth

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Dialogue – Openness to Others and to the Truth [1994]

In the history of civilizations, different cultures have undoubtedly influenced each other in various ways, but, with a single exception, we cannot find anything which we might call a long-term dialogue between cultures. That exception is provided by Europe. The European cultural, intellectual and spiritual tradition is based primarily on a double attempt at emancipation from the world of myth through intense polemical criticism. The crucial role here was played by the prophetic tradition of Old Testament Israel on the one hand and by the ancient Greek philosophers on the other. In simplified terms (which space here obliges me to use) it can be said that the difference lay in their orientation towards time and towards all change in time. Myth oriented human beings towards the recurrence and cyclical repetition of archetypes, in other words to a kind of time which was outside time, „above“ time, within which only things which had already existed, which had happened once before, had any chance. The Greek invention of concepts and conceptualization was an attempt to free humanity from these bonds by rationalizing archetypes, in other words removing them from their contexts of action and time and turning them into principles, origins (ARCHAI). The narrativity and with it time were reduced to marginal importance, and indeed in some cases (as with the Eleatics) time was eliminated completely. The philosophical ideal became an internally interconnected, consistent system of concepts, in some cases in an abbreviated form, an intellectual design, reminiscent of a mathematical formula. The Hebrew tradition, in contrast, preserved the narrative forms, but fundamentally altered the orientation of humanity towards time and within time. While in myth archaic man turned away from the future as if from a menacing abyss of extinction and nothingness and turned his face towards timeless or primeval archetypes, the old Jewish tradition, in contrast, started to establish a new style of life and of thinking, turning away from the past, which man leaves behind his back, looking the future in the face with courage and indeed with confidence and hope.

This new orientation led not only to a new appreciation of time as a series of coming unique opportunities and challenges to which it is necessary to respond personally, but also (and because of this) to the emergence of historical thinking and ergo to genuine history. Each of the two sides, in different ways, were both prepared and unprepared for this historical encounter which has lasted so far for some two and a half thousand years. This encounter is usually described as a syncretisation, but a better understanding of it would be as a dialogue. This dialogue encounter did not take place in quiet times, however, but was characterised by a series of periods of crisis and indeed catastrophes, which had not only external, but also internal causes. Greek philosophy, after reaching its peak in the persons of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, itself entered into a period of crisis and decline, largely because it was insufficiently capable of resisting new forms of myth which had already acquired a certain logical system, and which gradually penetrated the reflections of even the best thinkers of the day. It is highly probable that that period might have seen what we today talk about as the end of philosophy - something which threatened philosophy for other reasons too, for example through the Eleatics. The fact that philosophy at that time was close to extinction is borne out by the end of the upsurge in Arabic philosophy, which was so important for the renewal of an appreciation of the basic philosophical questions in Christian thinking, which thanks to this Arabic influence altered its orientation from Platonism to Aristotelianism. But while Islam was not capable, either then or later, of permanently providing sufficient space for the further development of philosophical thinking, Christianity, in spite of all difficulties, resistance, and spiritual and intellectual conflicts, was not only capable of providing the necessary space for philosophy, but even stimulated it to such an extent that the whole of modern and contemporary philosophy would be unthinkable without the inspiration and influence of Christianity, and, as we are today becoming more and more aware, of the still older influence of Hebrew thinking.

Historically, Christianity was formed from the intellectual point of view as the coming together or syncretization of the Greek method of conceptual thinking and the legacy of Hebrew pre-conceptual thinking, on the basis of unceasing intellectual and spiritual struggle, but also of necessity on the

basis of discussion, of dialogue. The result of these tremendous exertions, which were marked at certain periods by ebb and flow, was neither a hotchpotch of different elements, nor the dominance of one tradition and the suppression of the other. Rather, it was a kind of special symbiosis of intellectual directions which remained distinct while at the same time they influenced one another and consequently often came very close to one another without merging. This can be institutionally documented in the establishment and long subsequent development of philosophy, but also in the discipline of theology, which forms and continually reforms itself in dialogue with philosophy. (An analogous duality, which altered in a similar way, was created in the relationship between state and church, but I will not go into that at present.) Even today, and perhaps especially today, the intellectual achievements of theologians have more than once been not only something interesting for contemporary philosophy, but something essential which cannot be overlooked or disregarded, a challenge and a source of inspiration.

All this would appear to indicate that dialogue, which is actually a Greek invention, even though experiences with dialogue were never sufficiently and thoroughly reflected on in the Greek intellectual tradition, has in fact become an inseparable component of European cultural, spiritual, and especially intellectual tradition. This remains true in spite of the many excesses of anti-liberal and even fundamentalist dogmatism, from which Christianity (and especially various offshoots and manifestations of Christianity, which often do not claim to be Christian at all) has never been exempt, and is still not exempt today. The future of our planet, as we all know, is today seriously threatened in many ways. Usually the risks which we hear emphasized are those which have been and continue to be produced by this Greek system of conceptualisation and by the science and technology based on that system which are gradually taking over life and thought in the most distant parts of our planet. Rarely are the roots of these serious threats sought in intellectual and spiritual traditions. This is why calls for tolerance and liberalism are increasing so much, whereas dialogue is either not talked about or considered at all, or, if it is, then its essential character is largely misunderstood.

Let us look first of all at dialogue between individuals, for strictly speaking we can only talk about dialogue between intellectual and spiritual orientations and cultural traditions in a metaphorical way. Dialogue in its original sense means a conversation between two or more individuals, who do not only pass on information, and, in particular, who do not reduce the dialogue to respecting a mere collection of social rules during alternating monologues. An essential component of dialogue is the willingness to listen carefully to the other participants. That means a fundamental openness to the contribution they make, which they present to us with a similar openness, in the expectation that we will react in a constructive way to what they have to say, and that in our response we will say something that may in turn inspire them to further intellectual activity. Dialogue understood in this way is in fact based on the experience that if several people talk together sensibly and with enthusiasm for the „matter in hand“ (or rather for the truth in that matter), it can and often does happen that the true - although only relatively true - state of the matter, or perhaps it would be better to say the true view of that state, turns out to be something which none of the participants involved in the discussion, sometimes in a vehement way, had thought of when they entered the dialogue process. In short, dialogue is a conversation the result of which is neither an eclectic mass nor a hotchpotch of what the participants or at least some of them already knew or said beforehand, but something new, which has something to say, or at least could have something to say, to all of them. In this sense, dialogue is a place where the truth is revealed. And if there are no partners near at hand, it is necessary to at least simulate their participation by asking questions of them in their absence. In the past this was described as a conversation with one's own soul or with oneself, or a conversation between the soul and God. More recently it has been termed critical reflection, an integral part of which must be stepping back from oneself and from one's own starting-points and positions. And one such form of pre-conceptual reflection has been and remains prayer.

If dialogue is possible between people with very different intellectual and spiritual orientations, then dialogue between different cultures and intellectual and spiritual traditions must certainly be possible

too. This is certainly not something that can be easily and quickly mastered, as we can see from European history. However, there can be no doubt that such a dialogue between the cultural, religious, civilizational and other traditions of the world represents the only possible way forward into the future for us. The future of this world is dependent to a large extent on whether we will be able and willing to listen attentively to each other as part of a process of talking together. But the point of this mutual listening is not some sort of wild idea or even conviction that in that symphony and at times cacophony of differing views, somewhere one of them must be the right one, and that it is just a question of recognizing it and getting all the others to accept it. Genuine dialogue is actually just a form of preparation, so that through being attentive to the opinions of others we cultivate the ability to listen sensitively to the voice of truth itself, even if no lips have yet pronounced it. For we must not reduce the truth to true judgements or statements, nor to true conceptions and theories, which somebody somewhere has already thought out and expressed. Truth is the final yardstick of all our true thoughts and acts; but none of us, nor any cultural, intellectual or spiritual orientation has in its possession any yardstick for truth. Nothing can be the criterion for truth except truth itself. This was recognized by Baruch Spinoza, in virtual contradiction to his entire Cartesian philosophy, when he said that truth is „index sui et falsi“, the criterion both for itself and for error and lies.