

Talking Across *Religious* Differences

I met Dave while playing the piano in my dorm. Dave is a devout Jehovah's Witness (interested in music) who works as a member of the cleaning staff. As we share an interest in religion and spirituality, we soon found ourselves in a religious debate. The content of this debate has certainly been educational for me. However, the question of how to effectively talk across religious difference has been equally interesting. As I perhaps should have expected even more than I did, Dave often heard my words without hearing what I was trying to say, and I suspect that he would say the same about me. Upon further reflection, I realized that the difficulty communicating had a lot to do with the radical difference between his identity and mine.

Generally speaking, our sense of identity—whether it is attached to a group identity or not—determines our objectives. Talking with Dave, I often felt that we were not on the “same page”, but the basic reason for this was simple: we did not want to be on the same page. Both of us were interested in understanding each other, but neither of us was willing to take this open-mindedness so far as to compromise our own identity. From my point of view, for Dave to have been fully open-minded would have meant that he be willing to look at and argue not just some, but all of the problems I saw in a literal interpretation of the Bible, not from a Biblical standpoint, but from the standpoint of simple logic. From Dave's point of view, for me to have been fully open-minded would have meant that I do a thorough and meditative reading of the Bible, and try my best to believe what it says. For either of us to have met the other's expectation would have meant betraying our own identity: Dave's spirituality leaves little room for logic, which he sees as unnecessary once one accepts the literal truth of the Bible, and my spirituality leaves little room for the Bible. After my experience talking to Dave, my hypothesis is that if adopting another's perspective requires extra work constituting a compromise of one's own identity, communication across religious or cultural lines is often unsuccessful.

However, conflicting identities and differing perspectives are not the only causes of miscommunication. The article entitled “Cross-Cultural Communication” explains that in cross-cultural communication, “expectations about how paralinguistic signals [e.g. tone of voice, the length of a pause between sentences, etc.] are used to indicate what is meant by what is said are not shared” (Tannen, 204). I suspect that this sort of miscommunication occurred between Dave and I because I often felt that I didn’t have a chance to talk. He assumed the role of a teacher, and I, because I didn’t want to cut him off, and also because I really did want to better understand his religion, let him talk, waiting for a chance to express my disagreement. (I find myself forming a stereotype of fundamentalist Christians because my half-brother, who is a Born-Again Christian, is much the same. I know that my stereotype may be inaccurate, because my other stereotype about fundamentalists, namely the sketchy and incoherent belief systems I imagined went along with blind faith, proved to be untrue. I would not call Dave’s belief system sketchy or incoherent, because the truth is that it is very well thought out, however glaring the contradictions may be from my perspective.) Was Dave misreading my paralinguistic signals? Was I misreading his? I think Dave misinterpreted my show of interest and willingness to listen as signs that I was being convinced, which I was not. It could also be true, though I doubt it, that I was waiting for too long a pause in which to interject. I am full of questions when I start thinking about the metamesages of our conversations; all I can say for certain is that paralinguistics are relevant to the situation.

However important metamesages may be to understanding the difficulty of talking across a religious difference, they are only a surface issue. When I began email correspondence with Dave, the deeper and more significant barriers to effective communication remained. The most significant barrier was the fact that our objectives were directly in opposition to each other. Although my debates with Dave were largely driven by curiosity, it is nonetheless true that I secretly hoped I could say something that would make him question his conviction that the Bible is literally true. For his part, he hoped to convert me into a Jehovah’s Witness. What this also meant was that we had different concepts of spiritual growth. Dave strives to obey “God’s law”, whereas I strive to be whole, which includes

accepting the rebellious part of myself, not unlike what Gloria Anzaldúa describes in *Borderlands: La Frontera* (but not totally like it either). If Dave read *Borderlands*, he would probably be appalled; Anzaldúa's concepts are foreign to his values and identity. Although Anzaldúa's claim that Christianity rejects the body and its desires may be an oversimplification, I think it applies in this case because for Dave, life is all about following the rules. Given our divergent aims, I am naturally opposed to the idea of obeying Biblical law, and Dave is naturally opposed to a holistic approach to spirituality. This setup cannot help but limit my appreciation of his perspective and vice versa.

This does not mean, however, that we cannot be respectful of each other and understand each other as much as possible given the limitations. For example, when I brought up one archaic Biblical passage, Dave claimed there was a perfectly valid justification for why a man who had injured his testicles in warfare or other such accident should have been denied admittance to the "assembly of the Lord." Rather than say I thought his point of view was revolting, I understood that in his mind, this was perfectly reasonable. Likewise, he has been very respectful of my views. This makes me confident that religious discussion could lead to greater understanding and tolerance if only more people were open to it. Regrettably, many religions are based on the doctrine of exclusivity. The Jehovah's Witnesses are eager to talk about their religious beliefs, but their philosophy also includes being "no part of this world." The one subject I know I could not get Dave to debate would be the proposed war in Iraq. The Jehovah's Witnesses have a policy of staying out of political issues—they don't vote, for example. Their desire to separate themselves from the rest of the world in this instance is understandable given their beliefs, but I agree with Lynell George, who pointed out that the enclave approach is thinking in polar terms. Entering into the political discussion would not necessarily mean conforming to the ways of the majority; rather, the Jehovah's Witnesses could demonstrate their belief that peace is the best option and increase outside understanding of their views. No loss of individual or group identity would be necessary; a balance between isolation and assimilation is possible. Although Lynell George addressed racial issues, his point is just as valid for the issue of religious separatism.

I know from experience that communication across religious lines is a difficult task. However, although differences of identity may prevent total appreciation of everyone else's perspective, it is always important to increase understanding and eliminate stereotypes, which is why I believe open religious discussion is of tremendous value.