

Course: Understanding the Profane and the Sacred

To: Fr. Louis Ha

Unit 4: Language that Communicates the Sacred

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The Word, Silence, and Praise

We think. We listen to a news story. We greet people. We order a coffee. We make a commitment. We come to an agreement. We disagree ... We do so with words, sometimes by rote or passively, often without attending to the medium. Language is something we take for granted once we have gained fluency.

An Afghan-American writer, Tamim Ansary, in recalling the history of the last 50,000 years, reminds us how remarkable the use of language is:

When words stop referring directly to things in the world and start having a relationship with other words ...

Developing language meant we could start using words as if they were the objects named....once that happened, a whole world of words could form parallel to the world of things. Two language users could enter that world and interact within it as if it were the world itself.

Tomorrow, lunch, noon, what could they point to? Nothing....When two guys talk about getting tacos tomorrow at noon they are not only interacting in a world they're each imagining, they're imagining the same world. If they weren't, they wouldn't both show up at the same place and time tomorrow.¹

Through language, we enter a symbolic world. Yet, as Ansary points out, we do not own the meaning that we transmit to others through language; rather we possess the language with which we and others in the network create meaning together. Conflicts arise when we try to short-change the process.

¹ Tamim Ansary, *The Invention of Yesterday: A 50,000-Year History of Human Culture, Conflict, and Connection*. New York: Public Affairs (Hachette Book Group), 2019. The quote is taken from https://archive.org/details/CSPAN2_20200429_130600_Tamim_Ansary_The_Invention_of_Yesterday

“There is a season for everything... a time for war, a time for peace” (Ecclesiastes 3: 1, 8)

These days, with many displaced and a rhetoric of violence and discord fills the air, I wish to think a little about the role language plays in advancing war or peace.

Unlike an egg or a chair, war and peace seem like words too big to point to. Are they abstract? But in many parts of the world today people are living in close quarters with conflict, or are desperately in search of peace, prompting them to cross dangerous seas, deserts and equally forbidding borders. We recognize war in images of bodies—both civilians and soldiers—strewn across the fields, or right in the doorway of someone’s home; of Ukrainian fathers taking leave of their family who is fleeing in the opposite direction; or the shockingly emaciated body of a girl in Gaza; of hope left suspended when poets, young doctors, mothers, fathers, teachers, along with extended family members, were wiped out by bombs overnight. These pictures tell a thousand words.

Daily on the news, in social media we are inundated with a language of violence. Instead of working together to create meanings that would sustain, that could allow diverse communities and species to thrive, or free the imagination so together we can tackle problems in common, an all-out effort is made to impose a unilateral meaning. Alternative interpretations will be shut up.

Russia’s language of aggression vis a vis Ukraine serves as a case in point. In a 2021 essay, “On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” Putin declared univocally that Ukraine is a non-state, and a historical part of Russia. A rebuttal of the false narrative and misinformation is included in the footnote below.²

In “Challenging Putin’s Language,” Martin Kragh explains how the language of aggression works³:

How can a society reach a point at which a war of aggression becomes possible? It requires more than conventional propaganda, in the sense of PR or advertising. The French philosopher Jacques Ellul argued in his book *Propagandes* (1962) that in order for a message to take root in a society, it must resonate with established myths and intellectual traditions—for example, longstanding ideas of national greatness, or a deep divide between “us and them”.

² See “Putting Putin’s false history of Ukraine into perspective” published in POLITICS AND SOCIETY, 21 March 2022. (<https://lens.monash.edu/@politics-society/2022/03/21/1384545/putting-putins-false-history-of-ukraine-into-perspective> (accessed on 24 June 2024))

³ Martin Kragh, “Challenging Putin’s Language,” SCEEUS (Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies) Commentary No. 3, 2024. <https://sceeus.se/en/publications/challenging-putins-language/> (accessed on 24 June 2024)

The Kremlin frequently calls Ukraine's government a "regime", thus implying that the political leadership is illegitimate. Ukraine's democratically elected president Volodymyr Zelensky is called a "marionette" controlled by Washington and Brussels.

The word "regime" originates from Soviet propaganda, in which it was used to refer to the "antiquated tsarist regime" and later to states within the "capitalistic Western Bloc". The term was taken from French political vocabulary: *l'ancien régime*, or the "old order", used by French revolutionaries to describe France prior to 1789. Ever since the Maidan Revolution in 2014, when the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich fled Ukraine, the Kremlin has referred to Ukraine's government as the "junta" or "coup leaders".

This choice of words is part of the Kremlin's attack on the sovereignty of the Ukrainian state. Putin claims that Russia has not signed any binding agreements with the new "regime", and thus he does not consider himself obligated to respect the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, which accorded Ukraine security guarantees in exchange for giving up its nuclear arsenal.

So much for international treaties which are based on mutual or multilateral recognition of legal rights and obligations. Treaties have no enforcement mechanism, however, except on rare occasions of breach of peace or acts of aggression, when the Security Council may use sanctions or authorize the use of force. Freely undertaken treaties among states are the building blocks of international cohesion and justice system. Peace, global trade and collaboration are compromised when trust is eroded.⁴

War is hard. But the work of peace is even harder and often takes generations to seed and blossom. Serge Schmemmann covered the Oslo peace process as a young reporter. Now a member of the editorial board of *The New York Times*, and specializing in international affairs, he wrote an opinion piece "Why Oslo Still Has Relevance" that I think captures the essence of peacemaking.⁵

The wisdom of Oslo is a credit to the negotiators, who came to recognize the validity of each other's guiding narratives: of Israel's return to a promised land after an

⁴ "There is no over-arching compulsory judicial system or coercive penal system to address breaches of the provisions set out in treaties or to settle disputes. That is not to say that there are no tribunals in international law. The formation of the United Nations, for example, created the International Court of Justice, a means by which members of the world community may settle their disputes peacefully. The Security Council can also adopt, under Chapter VII, measures to enforce its decisions regarding threats to international peace and security, breaches of the peace or acts of aggression. Such measures may include sanctions or authorizing the use of force." (United Nations Treaty Collection, 2008 Treaty Event, Fact Sheet #5 Understanding International Law)

⁵ Serge Schmemmann, "Why Oslo Still Has Relevance" published in *The New York Times*, 30 October, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/30/opinion/oslo-accords-history.html> (accessed on 2 November, 2023)

unspeakable tragedy and of the Palestinians' dispossession and humiliating occupation. These narratives could not necessarily be reconciled, but the negotiators were able to escape the zero-sum feuding over who was in the right and acknowledge the other's yearnings, history and grievances.

If peace is to have a chance, it will depend not on one's monologic truth-telling, but the capacity to *imagine both*.

That peace may rise above the din of war and violent language, I turn to another verse in Ecclesiastes: There is a season for everything... a time for keeping silent, a time for speaking (3: 1, 7)

I begin this section with the astounding Paraphrase of the Gospel of John written by Desiderius Erasmus in the early 16th century.⁶ I know of Erasmus as a satirist. So I am particularly grateful for this treasure trove of his Paraphrases of the New Testament. Four lines of the Gospel according to John unfold into four pages of rich theological reasoning that also sheds light on the Creed. "The Dao that can be spoken is not the Dao," says Laozi. Likewise Erasmus sums up the dilemma posed in the opening of John's Gospel, or for that matter in any use of the human language to discuss the divine:

in order to give some knowledge of things that are neither intelligible to anyone nor explicable by anyone, it is necessary to make use of words for things familiar to our perception, although there is nothing anywhere in the created universe from which a comparison could be drawn that would square exactly with the reality of the divine nature.

I will give a taste of how Erasmus paraphrases the first line "In the beginning was the Word: the Word was with God and the Word was God" (John 1: 1) :

The term 'word' (*sermo/verbum*) is used because through him God, who in his own nature cannot be understood by any reasoning, chose to become known to us; and he chose to become known for no other reason than that from knowledge of him we might attain eternal bliss. This is no birth in time, or word like a human word. There is nothing corporeal in God, nothing that is transient in the flow of time or fixed by the boundaries of space, nothing at all dependent on beginning, development, ageing, or any alteration. He exists entire and eternal in himself, and as he himself is, so is his Son, forever coming to birth from him, everlasting from everlasting, almighty from almighty, all-good from all-good; in short, God from God, neither secondary nor subordinate to his begetter,

⁶ Desiderius Erasmus: COLLECTED WORKS OF ERASMUS - PARAPHRASE ON JOHN, translated and annotated by Jane E. Phillips, (Toronto/Buffalo/London: University of Toronto Press, 1991) JOHN 1:1-4, pp.15-18.

eternal word of the eternal mind, whereby the Father forever speaks with himself as in mystic thought, even before the creation of this world, the Father known to no one except himself alone and the Son. There was never a time when he had not begotten for himself the Son, there was never a time when he had not brought forth for himself the all-powerful word....

Hence those who think that the word of God is secondary to him who produces it, as with us intention is prior to utterance, stray far from the truth, as do those who count the word of God, by which God the Father created all things, among created objects. But even more stupid is the mistake of those who think that the Son and word of God came into existence only at the time when he was physically born of the Virgin Mary. Every created thing has a beginning in time, but the Son of God was born twice, once from his Father before all time, or rather without time, true God from true God, and again in time marked off from eternity, of the Virgin Mary, true human from a human.

Now I wish to take the opposite course than what Erasmus did; instead of expansive paraphrase, I would like to try the apo-phatic (other than + speaking).

Though the Apostle Paul personally wrote a good part of the New Testament, he did not privilege speech:

Though I command languages both human and angelic -- if I speak without love, I am no more than a gong booming or a cymbal clashing. (1 Corinthians 13: 1)

In Letter to the Romans, he uses "groaning" to describe how all creation expresses their suffering and longing to be free from the bondage of sin, hurt, death, limitations, etc.:

We are well aware that the whole creation, until this time, has been groaning in labour pains. And not only that: we too, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, even we are groaning inside ourselves, waiting with eagerness for our bodies to be set free.

When the Holy Spirit "comes to help us in our weakness" --

...for, when we do not know how to pray properly, then the Spirit personally makes our petitions for us in groans that cannot be put into words; and he who can see into all hearts knows what the Spirit means because the prayers that the Spirit makes for God's holy people are always in accordance with the mind of God. (Romans 8: 22-23, 26-27)

The Spirit speaks in "groans that cannot be put into words." The groans are intelligible to God, and are actually more pleasing to God than human words, for the Spirit's prayers "are always in accordance with the mind of God."

Interestingly, Paul is not always in control of his language. Like the Psalmist in the Old Testament, Paul would break into songs of praise (the technical term is "doxology" from *doxa*, the Greek word for glory). As one interpreter commented on Romans 11: 33-36 "The apostle

Paul often can't contain himself. In the midst of something he has written, he sometimes explodes into praise."⁷

Where a rhetoric of violence and aggression surrounds us, it seems to me one may cultivate the language of peace by joining in the Spirit's groaning, and occasionally bursting into praise. In that sense an informal doxology in everyday life may be a pleasant surprise. Recently I have a chance to accompany someone who is caught in a nasty legal case. I also observe deep wounds that have remained unhealed through many years. I suggested that besides seeking a just settlement, we might discover more: "No matter what other people say or how they judge, what kind of person do I wish to be? How much effort am I willing to put in to become the person I wish to be?"

The more important judgment/ decision, it seems to me, is this: Standing before God – who created me and gave me freedom – how do I choose to live out my life-gift? I guess until I spoke those words to my friend, I myself had not realized the grace of my own creation and the gift of freedom. Also in that moment, my eyes were opened, and I saw my friend in all his goodness and unlimited gifts:

"This is my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on him." (Matthew 3:17)

I hope as my friend journeys, he will discover the abundant peace, grace, freedom and hope of being the Son -- that there will be plenty of *doxa* along the way.

PS

Between groaning and praise, there is also the language of silence. When I practise contemplation, sometimes I take as inspiration the first lines in John's Gospel

In the beginning was the Word:
 the Word was with God
 and the Word was God.
 He was with God in the beginning.
 Through him all things came into being,
 not one thing came into being except through him.
 What has come into being in him was life,
 life that was the light of men;
 and light shines in darkness,
 and darkness could not overpower it.
 A man came, sent by God.
 His name was John.
 He came as a witness,

⁷ <https://christfellowshipnc.org/2021/01/pauls-doxology-romans-1133-36/>

To bear witness to the light.

That seems purpose and encouragement enough and a cause for joyful praise!