WITTGENSTEIN, RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY, AND COMMUNICATIVE RETICENCE

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ABSTRACT: Attempts to communicate across boundaries involving religions or cultures may fail before anything is asserted. While it is common in comparative philosophy of religion to focus on the compatibility or conflict between what is said by different interlocutors about metaphysical commitments or ethical values, this article instead examines reticence. Reticence has many forms in connection with religious and philosophical traditions. These include eloquent silences, speech acts counseling care in language use, circumspection about sharing ideas, declarations of inexpressibility, and political reticence. Drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein's "Lectures on Religious Belief" and *On Certainty* as well as work by Alessandra Tanesini on silence and speech acts, this article considers communicative and epistemic aspects of diverse religious encounters that may give rise to varied reticent moments. The aim is to enhance thinking about inter-religious and cross-cultural discourses by exploring the ways in which reticent moments are salient, if frequently overlooked, aspects of complex communicative situations.

KEYWORDS: Cross-cultural dialogue; religious diversity; speech acts; silence; Wittgenstein

Introduction

When it comes to the prospects for communication across religious and cultural boundaries, it is easy to feel oneself lured into extremes of utopian enthusiasm about the promise of finding mutual understanding or skepticism at the prospects for meaningful meetings between perhaps incommensurable worldviews. Worries about relativism, fideism, and incommensurability are in a sense worries about the breakdown of epistemology as a common human undertaking, the fracturing of a link between public reason and private faith or cultural commitment, and the impossibility

of finding a shared frame of reference for interpretation, translation, and exchange of arguments. When trust is present, successful interpretation is more likely (Carroll 2014, p. 165), but when trust fails or is never really established in the first place, the fragility of our common epistemic and communicative endeavors appears.

The dynamics of trust and mistrust as a result of interactions between religious and cultural groups means that social epistemic and communicative endeavors will be at times difficult or even fraught. This needs to be recognized in theoretical approaches to conversation across boundaries. Putting the focus on what is not said in religious discourses will help to shine a light on some of the significant challenges to understanding between worldviews. Surveying difficulties, likewise, will put ambitions in perspective and provide a rationale for patient listening amidst ongoing misunderstanding, confusion, or lack of trust.

In attending to difficult or fraught moments of inter-religious and cross-cultural communication, this article considers a set of communicative dynamics which I explore under the umbrella of *reticence*. By "reticence," I understand a pulling back from straightforward participation in discourse. Moments of reticence include silences, ruptures in conversation, and resistance to being drawn (or drawn further) into dialogue; they often run counter to an audience's expectations. Instances of reticence can occur both *within* religious discourses and in encounters *between* religious and cultural groups. For example, religious exemplars may refrain from explaining the deeper meaning of an idea or practice, choosing to leave the matter unexpressed. Religious texts may caution against recklessness in speech. Teachers may hold back certain teachings only for those who have shown a certain aptitude. Sometimes, certain points of focus – such as the nature of divine beings or realities – may be held to be ineffable and thus incapable of being expressed in language. Lastly, in some discursive contexts, interlocutors may surmise the political imprudence of direct or open communication.

My goal in considering some of the challenges to communication in diverse cultural and religious settings is not to remove all obstacles – to ensure complete and total transparency of meaning – but instead to attend to the potential interlocutors that may be present in a given social context. In getting to know better the circumstances one is actually living in one can apprise the possibilities of inter-religious and inter-cultural understanding. I argue that five forms of reticence are salient within discourses involving religions: (1) eloquent silences, (2) speech acts advocating for care in language use, (3) circumspection about sharing ideas, (4) declarations of inexpressibility, and (5) political forms of reticence.[1] In order to approach thinking about the relevant communication situations, the article begins with a brief overview of some contextual features of inter-religious communication. I turn second to Wittgenstein's philosophy and its strengths for appreciating dynamics of social context, misunderstanding, and difference in way of life. The third part considers recent work on "eloquent silences" in order to appreciate some of the not always easy to detect dynamics that may be happening in inter-religious and inter-cultural encounters. Attention to these five forms of reticence is helpful for recognizing communicative dynamics that might otherwise be overlooked in inter-religious

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[1] These five forms of reticence are roughly similar to the forms of reticence first explored in Carroll 2020.

encounters. Developing the capacity for attention to these forms of reticence is likewise helpful for acknowledging the varied interlocutors who one hopes to engage in dialogue.

Contexts of Inter-Religious Discourse

Encounters between interlocutors identifying with different religious or cultural traditions raise a host of philosophical problems relating to communication. John Clayton observes that in inter-religious contexts of philosophy, some presuppositions hold across traditions – perhaps the plausibility of beliefs or practices relating to gods, the idea that there are authoritative scriptures – even if there is disagreement about the properties of those gods, the nature and purposes of practices, and the particular contents of collections of scriptures (Clayton 2006, p. 5). In culturally secular contexts of communication, there are very few common presuppositions among interlocutors identifying with religious or cultural traditions. Yet, even in secular contexts, there are differences from one society to another. That is to say, nonreligious presuppositions about the nature, purpose, and propriety of communication are plural (Maclure & Taylor, 2011, p. 15). In addition to the *laïcité* and individual rights forms of secularism found in the political systems of France and the United States, respectively, there is also the secularism of state management of religious affairs as one finds in China. When philosophers approach the topic of religious diversity and cross-cultural understanding, they may have in mind communication between religious philosophers or philosophical works across different traditions, but the encounters between people who find particular religious and cultural ways of life to be sensible are typically more textured than that philosophical picture would suggest. Attending to the landscapes in which traditions are situated – or even identified as religions or cultures – is also important for understanding the rhetorical-hermeneutical situation (Carroll 2025, p. 23).

There are several sorts of encounters that may come to mind when one thinks of communication across diverse religious and nonreligious traditions. We may think of high profile or local organized meetings between representatives of traditions. We might also think of encounters between scholars who are identified as belonging to different religions or traditions. Examples of this would include dialogues between Jesuits and Confucians in China during the seventeenth century, at which time they considered the question of the compatibility of ritual veneration of ancestors with Christian piety (Sun 2013, p. 32), and encounters between Buddhist and Vedic philosophers in the Indian *vada* tradition of debate (Clayton 2006, p. 36).

Disagreements among interlocutors about the aims of inter-religious communication highlight how varied and complicated a topic this is. Indeed, Clayton's work on "defensible difference" offers an alternate perspective on the aims of religious and inter-religious communication, less to identify what is common in religious belief or practice and more to appreciate what is different, and different based on identifiably rational commitments at that Clayton 2006, p. 59). In a series of essays that forms the first part of *Religions, Reasons, and Gods*, Clayton outlines and argues for the usefulness of clarifying defensible differences as a philosophical end for

cross-cultural and or inter-religious encounters. The idea is to understand what interlocutors mean by their claims and arguments about gods, sources of knowledge, moral practices, and religious observance, rather than to leap to contesting their views or advocating for one's own. It is not that rational engagement is left out; but it is temporarily bracketed for the purpose of reliable, charitable interpretation. Clayton observes that this end for inquiry may be particularly suitable for contexts characterized by deep diversities, which will happen frequently in instances of attempted communication between religious or between religious and nonreligious interlocutors.

A key aim of Clayton's is to critique and displace the idea that philosophers *at all times and places* aim at establishing their metaphysical views before any and all potential audiences. This common view that many would take for granted cannot be reasonably projected backwards in time without distortion of the philosophers or texts one seeks to understand. Instead, Clayton observes that philosophers advance arguments with a variety of different ends in mind, and these ends are often tradition specific: edification, explanation, and wonder. Investigating social and historical context thus becomes relevant to interpretation and engagement with philosophies that are somewhat distant from an interpreter's location. Registering this feature of argumentation is valuable to avoid overlooking salient features of cross-traditional encounters that might otherwise evade one's grasp. When a Buddhist or Muslim represents certain features of Buddhist practice (Poceski 2009, p. 91) or Islamic ethics (Lai 2020, p. 170) in terms familiar to Confucianism, the purpose is not necessarily to disinterestedly discover the fundamental ethical core among these traditions; historically, the purpose may instead have been primarily to achieve a practical foothold for these once new religions within Imperial China.

Wittgenstein, Epistemic Gulfs, and Inter-Religious Communication

Some philosophers, such as Mikel Burley and Gorazd Andrejč have recently drawn on Wittgenstein's philosophy in approaching inter-religious communication. The approaches often emphasize the critical importance of context for understanding religious beliefs and practices – and especially the epistemic distances that can lie between people. Many philosophers drawing on Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* study how fundamental commitments – such as core religious beliefs – may operate at a different level of thought and inquiry than ordinary aspects of epistemology, such as belief-formation about perceptual objects. Wittgenstein's metaphors such as "grammar" (which evoke contextual presuppositions about language use) and "hinges" (which refers to grounding epistemic commitments) will be helpful for appreciating both what is said in religious and inter-religious discourses as well as what is unsaid.

In a series of books and essays, Burley has been advancing a "radical pluralist" account of philosophy of religion inspired by Wittgenstein (Burley 2020). The idea is to develop an approach to philosophy of religion that takes seriously the deep diversities that may be present when it comes to religions. Burley is interested in broadening the field and attending closely to its many diversities, emphasizing

"heterogeneity" of forms of religiosity and the use of "thick descriptions" in enriching one's understanding of that heterogeneity (Burley 2020, p. 193). The possibilities for inter-religious understanding are greatly enhanced, in Burley's view, when potential interlocutors have gone through the painstaking work of freeing themselves from the "craving" for generalizations and then are open to listening closely to one another (Burley 2019, p. 46). Applying his approach to inter-religious communication, Burley observes three themes from Wittgenstein's later approach to philosophy that are relevant to communication across boundaries of culture or religion: (1) Wittgenstein's "anti-essentialism," (2) an understanding of beliefs and concepts being part of a "form of life," and (3) an "analogical method…of bridging gaps in one's comprehension of another's activities by looking for analogically comparable activities in one's own life or in the lives of those with whom one is familiar" (Burley 2019, pp. 34-35).

Andrejč's approach to Wittgenstein and inter-religious communication is also nuanced, drawing on Wittgenstein both in terms of method but also inspiration. In *Wittgenstein and Interreligious Disagreement* (2016), Andrejč develops a reading of Wittgenstein's varied remarks on religion, delineating several themes or conceptions of religiosity that are alive in Wittgenstein's writings (Andrejč 2016, p. 19). In so doing, Andrejč encourages a pluralistic overarching conception of religiosity itself, so as to remain attuned to the plentiful arrangements of religions in today's world.[2] As with Burley, Andrejč advocates for attending empathetically to the dynamics of engagement and disagreement between interlocutors in attempts at inter-religious understanding (Andrejč 2016, p. 261).

We can see the themes of empathetic listening appearing in numerous Wittgensteinian texts. Particularly relevant in this vein are the "Lectures on Religious Belief" and *On Certainty*. While numerous other Wittgenstein texts are relevant to philosophy of religion, these texts stand out for their importance for understanding across cultural and religious boundaries. In the "Lectures on Religious Belief," Wittgenstein memorably envisions profound epistemic gaps between people who do not share the same beliefs concerning religious matters (e.g., between someone who believes in the day of judgment and someone who does not, or between someone who thinks it is reasonable to put consecrated eucharistic elements into an armored box and one who does not) (Wittgenstein 1967, p. 53). In these lecture notes, we see a few examples of the "enormous gulfs" that Wittgenstein observes can lay between people.[3] Wittgenstein also reflects on the significance of these gulfs, what they reveal about

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[2] Andrejč has in mind what he calls the "grammaticalist," "instinctivist," "existentialist," and "nonsensicalist" conceptions of religion (Andrejč 2016, p. 19). The idea is that in some texts Wittgenstein advances one or another (maybe more than one) of these overarching ways of thinking about what religion ultimately is. Rather than privileging one of them, Andrejč views them all as capturing different aspects of religions.

[3] Cora Diamond cautions against overinterpreting Wittgenstein when it comes to thinking of epistemic distances between people. Rather than seeing two kinds of positions people can be in: discursively engaged in a religion or discursively distant (e.g, by either playing or not playing a language-game in which religious language has a use), Diamond observes four different ways in which people may be distant from each other in Wittgenstein's analysis: disagreeing within a shared system, non-contradictory distance, distance with contradiction, and differences in attitude regarding what it is to entertain a possibility (Diamond 2005, p. 100). So, in her view, it is not just that enormous gulfs lie between people, but the gulfs that lie between people are themselves of varied kinds.

human life. Wittgenstein's tone is one of respect, sometimes consternation, sometimes puzzlement.

In contemplating these deep epistemic gulfs, Wittgenstein considers the possession or absence of mostly Christian religious ideas and practices. The topics Wittgenstein considers across the lecture notes include certain sorts of doctrinal beliefs common to Christianity such as belief in an afterlife (Wittgenstein 1967, p. 65), the Last Judgment (pp. 53-57), resurrection after death (p. 56), punishment for sins (pp. 54-55), the existence of God (pp. 59-64); however, Wittgenstein also considers non-doctrinal religious beliefs such as regarding how to protect consecrated bread in a war zone (p. 53), those concerning seeing or encountering the dead in certain rituals (p. 65), the surviving of death (pp. 68-70), miracle reports from sacred sites (e.g., Lourdes) (pp. 60-61), and seances (p. 61). He also from time to time considers situations that may give rise to philosophical reflection on religious beliefs, such as encountering the beliefs and practices of people separated from the larger society (p. 58), or simply people possessing deeply different ideas about the nature of death (pp. 65-71).

Another source relevant to understanding the epistemic distances between people, including distances related to religious beliefs is Wittgenstein's late work, *On Certainty*. In considering forms of certainty, he writes: "My life shews that I know or am certain that there is a chair over there, or a door, and so on. – I tell a friend e.g. 'Take that chair over there', 'Shut the door', etc. etc." (§7) Certainties are not merely claims that we may make explicitly but are also the basic assumptions that are part of a life. One might only become aware of these grounding certainties under unusual circumstances, as when considering philosophical questions in epistemology or encountering people who do not share these certainties. Religious certainties might only appear in how one lives one's life. They will not necessarily be religious doctrines, although doctrines should not be excluded from consideration. Rather, religious certainties will be taken-for-granted features of a religious way of life (e.g., the idea that God is watching you, that karma registers the moral quality of our actions, that ancestors are still part of one's family life and efficacious in this world after their deaths).

In conceiving of interrelations among the beliefs one may hold, Wittgenstein also uses the metaphor of "pictures." We might then think of religious beliefs as embedded in an overall "picture of the world":

> 94. But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between the true and the false.

> 95. The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules. (Wittgenstein 1969, p. 15)

The visual metaphor of a picture here describes how beliefs tend to link up and constitute an overall way of seeing the world. In Wittgenstein's imagining, a picture does not rest on a chain of reasoning. Rather, pictures are frameworks for seeing the world that we typically inherit from others, perhaps through being raised in a way of life. Religious ways of life are examples of the kinds of orientations to the world that may be inherited from a previous generation. The steadiness of religious beliefs stems from their connections to these pictures; that is why they are largely not very sensitive to developments in the sciences or elaborations on logical consistency. In writing or speaking about "religion", Wittgenstein seems to be thinking paradigmatically of Christian and perhaps other sorts of Abrahamic religious beliefs as being rooted in received pictures of the world, but a wide variety of forms of religiosity are also inherited socially within families and communities, as one is raised in a way of life.

If one takes a global-critical approach to the concept of religion, then one will recognize that beliefs are not always central features of religions (see, for example, Chinese popular religion). Indeed, one may come to see that the ascribing of religion status to a belief, practice, or tradition is not a given but rather an interpretive move based on perception of (perhaps relevant) similarities with paradigmatic cases. Even in religions for which beliefs are held to be central to their self-understanding, it does not follow that there is a *single* core commitment; rather there may very well be a dynamic complex of commitments, with a shifting sense of priority among them over time. One might then counter that even if a religion does not have core doctrines, it must have other commitments in virtue of which it is a religion (e.g., key practices that are taught within the tradition, such as rituals of veneration of ancestors as performed within the family in Chinese popular religion); but it is not obvious that such an approach would produce grounding hinge commitments for all of those traditions that are called religions (Carroll 2025, p. 106).[4]

In bringing this to bear on interreligious encounters we may anticipate that they will involve contrasts or even clashes between grounding hinge commitments, but due to deep diversities concerning religions, they need not always involve such stark juxtapositions. While Abrahamic religions often are exclusivist – one cannot be both Jewish and Muslim at the same time – traditional religions in China and other East Asian societies do not show the same level of exclusivity. The "three teachings" (*sānjiào* 三教) of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism are widely understood in Chinese culture to mutually inform one another. Thus, one may find images of the Bodhisattva Guanyin or (less commonly) Confucius at Daoist temples as well as Buddhist appreciation for the Confucian value of filial piety (*xiào* 孝). Of course, perhaps nearly all Chinese people today would reject the idea of Confucianism being a religion, but the interrelations between these three traditions, philosophically, institutionally, and popularly shows a way of thinking about religiosity that is pluralistic and blended in contrast with what one finds in traditions or contexts in which singular devotion to God is paradigmatic.

Drawing on these contextual ideas from Wittgenstein, as well as from Clayton, we can see that when people enter into some sort of dialogue, in order to communicate

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[4] It is possible that a different sort of metaphor to grasp a way of life would be helpful here. See Harrison (2015) on perceptual versus path-metaphors for conceiving of philosophy comparatively.

with one another, they must agree in some of the beliefs or commitments they hold (e.g., recognition that they live in a shared world and that they speak a common language). Furthermore, they must recognize the value of having a conversation at all. They do not need to agree necessarily on the reasons for having that conversation, but in order to begin talking, they must each have an interest in the conversation. If they do not or if it is unbalanced trust, then communication may be difficult and produce forms of reticence. When considering some of the central doctrines, commitments, and values of religious traditions, it is easy to envision that what one party sees as well-established and perhaps indubitable will be uncertain and poorly supported when viewed from another context.

Religious Diversity and Communicative Reticence

Approaching religions through the Wittgensteinian metaphor of hinge commitments highlights the network of relations among the parts (including beliefs and practices) of a religious or cultural way of life. This metaphor, however, should not be imposed uncritically on all those traditions we call religions. Insofar as our attention should be "radically pluralist," as Burley would advise, we should avoid insisting that all instances of religiosity must have the same features. Wittgensteinian themes like "intellectual distance" and "hinge commitment" help scholars see some of the challenges to communication across culture, community, or religion; they may also aid philosophers in seeing why and how forms of reticence might arise in discourses that cross these boundaries. Perception of a mismatch across interlocutors' beliefs and commitments may lead to awareness of the potential for misunderstanding.

Clayton's attention to the different ends of arguments is a theme that accords with Wittgenstein's attention to the contexts and uses of language in *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein [1953] 2009, §23, pp. 14-15). Clayton highlights the spiritual goals of religions which followers and practitioners strive toward (e.g., salvation, submission to God, liberation from the cycle of rebirth, enlightenment, vital and long life). These ends may be reflected in practices, ethical values, expressions of belief, and even refraining from participating in straightforward discourse.

Reticence can likewise appear for a wide variety of reasons. There are things it is improper to say in certain contexts, such as the name of God in orthodox Judaism, that indicate a particular ethical stance with respect to language use. Explicit teachings about the dangers of careless speech appear across numerous religious and ethical traditions. For example, numerous passages from Biblical texts, frequently in the Wisdom literature and New Testament Epistles, evoke the link between ethics, religiosity, and speech. A good example of this stance is found in the Book of Ephesians verse 4:29, "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear." (Coogan, Brettler, Newsom, & Perkins, 2010, p. 2058) This passage links ethics and upbuilding in faith with speech.

Sometimes traditions emphasize the importance of distinct followers cultivating their capacities for certain teachings rather than having them explicitly or dogmatically presented for any and all audiences. As we will see below, this is evident in Confucian

and Zen Buddhist discourses. Likewise, the Gospel of Mark (4:10-12) presents Jesus as reticent to explain the meaning of his teaching by way of parables, with "the secret of the kingdom of God" being available to his disciples while those on the "outside" remaining perplexed (Coogan, Brettler, Newsom, & Perkins, 2010, p. 1798).

The forms of reticence can be divided into those which involve silence and those which do not. Silent forms of reticence[5] can present themselves within traditions, but spoken and written forms of reticence may also be found. For understanding both broad types, attention to performative aspects of communication is vital. Alessandra Tanesini (2018) writes about speech act theory and the illocutionary and perlocutionary effects of silence. "Eloquent silence" is the name that she and other philosophers and linguists use to refer to speech acts that operate through silence. Building on the work of Michal Ephratt (2008) in parsing eloquent silences by means of Gricean conversational implicature, Tanesini analyzes certain forms of silence as semantic or pragmatic events in connection with ongoing discourse. Tanesini's essay provides plentiful examples of performative silences: a worker remaining unresponsive after a colleague's disrespectful comment, a student being quiet in response to a teacher's question, a white audience remaining quiet and disengaged after a Black person's description of experiences of racial discrimination (Tanesini 2018, p. 109).

Forms of reticence including eloquent silences are found broadly within philosophical approaches where philosophy itself is approached less as a theoretical activity and more as part of a way of life aimed at spiritual or ethical development (Hadot 1995). The overarching theme of philosophies pursuing overlapping but distinct ends is a useful reminder for approaching philosophical traditions with an eye to their myriad potential distances from contemporary readers. Attending to local social and historical contexts of philosophical activity is helpful for avoiding misunderstanding.

In intra-traditional contexts, silences can function as implicit forms of critique, aimed at transforming the reader or the self. For example, in the Confucian *Analects*, one can see forms of reticence such as eloquent silences and circumspection about sharing ideas used in order to achieve the specific philosophical ends of clarification of language or cultivation of virtue and social harmony (Carroll 2016, p. 1163; 2020, p. 693). Consider the following passage from the *Analects* (7.8):

> The Master said, "I will not open the door for a mind that is not already striving to understand, nor will I provide words to a tongue that is not already struggling to speak. If I hold up one corner of a problem, and the student cannot come back to me with the other three, I will not attempt to instruct him again." (Slingerland 2003, p. 66)

In this passage, Confucius indicates an unwillingness to teach students who do not "struggle to speak" and who are not resourceful enough to "come back" with the other three corners of a problem. This is an explicit declaration of reticence in the goal of

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[5] Not all forms of silence are reticent. For a silence to be an example of reticence, it would need to either function as a speech act or as an act of discursive evasion of a powerful other.

teaching students not to think of themselves as passive recipients of instruction but as active participants in their own learning. In the *Analects*, one sees Confucius clarifying a teaching in a way that reinforces the effort the student must make in rising to grasp a concept; the teachings are not clarified in a dogmatic way (that is, in a way that is indifferent to context, for any potential audience) but in a relational way (in a way fitting to particular students and their strengths and weaknesses).

Forms of reticence can sometimes be combined in texts. For example, the Zen Buddhist monk and philosopher Dōgen mixes both eloquent silences and explicit redirections of conversation in his teachings on meditation and ethics:

> Good is not thought of; evil is not thought of. It is not 'mind', intellect or consciousness; it is not thoughts, ideas, or perceptions…Having thus regulated body and mind, take a breath and exhale fully. Sitting fixedly, think of not thinking. How do you think of not thinking? Nonthinking. (Heisig, Kasulis, & Maraldo 2011, pp. 142-143)

Dōgen teaches in a way that undermines holding fast to dogmatic ways of thinking and practicing. He is trying to convey a practice through discourse in contrast with taking an intellectual approach to grasping Buddhist dharma. In this way, Dōgen typifies a reticent Zen Buddhist approach to communication; as with the Chán/Zen story of the Buddha first passing this teaching nonverbally to the disciple Mahākāśyapa by showing him a flower, it is not just that silences are used communicatively, but also that language is used to convey an attitude of nonreliance on language for concrete understanding. As Steven Heine puts it," For Zen, living words have usefulness in that they are deployed to expose the futility and to bring to an end the use of dead words, or as a poison to counteract poison or an example of fighting fire with fire" (Heine 2013, p. 351).

Eloquent silences in texts and teaching moments, admonitions to be careful when it comes to language use, and circumspection about sharing ideas to the unready show the roles that forms of reticence can play inside religious thought and within philosophical traditions. In addition to forms of reticence that have been internal to the practices of a religion, there are external forms of reticence as well, i.e., those that arise in reaction to encounters with outsiders, whether they be religious or nonreligious others. Particularly relevant to the dynamics of inter-religious communication is Tanesini's treatment of forms of eloquent silence that involve "opting out" of discourse (Tanesini 2018, p. 112). Some examples she gives are of people who are refusing subordination through silent responses to questions or commands. These include instances of not saying what could be said because of implicit power dynamics. In addition to this dissenting form of opting out, Tanesini also mentions opting out that is motivated by fear of reprisal for what might be said or out of contempt for one's interlocutors. One might imagine here inter-religious encounters between groups of people identifying with religions that have a recent history of enmity. Participants in inter-religious encounters may opt out of any direct form of communication out of fear of making fraught relations worse, as in in some recent experiences when it comes to Jewish-Muslim attempts at dialogue (Cohen 2021, p. 207). Given the history of misunderstandings and calamity when it comes to

encounters between people identifying with different religions, cultures, political movements, and nations, it is understandable that opting-out forms of reticence might arise at times in inter-religious settings.

One contributing factor enhancing this fear may be larger cultural and political strictures against religious discourse in public, and interlocutors not differentiating between religious discourse and discourse on religions. In China, the state management of religiosities requires religious groups to register with the official patriotic associations affiliated with the five officially tolerated religious movements: Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, Protestant Christianity (Yang 2012, p. 93). Any religious groups that operate outside of officially sanctioned institutions, which are themselves integrated into the regulatory system, are not operating legally and thus are at risk of being banned by the state. Religions are not permitted to proselytize, and it is illegal to teach children under eighteen beliefs and traditions associated with the religion (Yang 2012, p. 87). Red lines are rarely explicitly drawn, a political dynamic that creates an incentive to reticence on the part of religious groups. Another kind of political reticence appears in this context as well, that of powerful parties leaving opaque the acceptable limits of what can be said in discourse they oversee. Few religious groups, given their dependent institutional footing, would risk their standing by challenging the extent of the boundaries of possible discourse.

This analysis of the dynamics and forms of reticence becomes relevant to communication involving religious diversities through directing the scholar's attention to interruptions, breakdowns, and preemptions in these encounters. When inter-religious communication is treated purely abstractly, then it is a matter of seeking out mutual understanding between politically equal interlocutors without concern for particular or hidden motives. This abstract context might perhaps describe *ideal* contexts and forms of academic exchange, but it is difficult to imagine this maximal level of trust and political recognition obtaining in the world. The terrain of dialogue is not flat.

Conclusion

This article has considered various forms of reticence that are relevant to communication in and between diverse religious traditions. Wittgenstein's philosophy, with its close attention to differences of meaning of expressions and epistemic gulfs that separate interlocutors, is particularly helpful for shining a light on moments of misunderstanding or withholding participation in social situations. From this study, five forms of reticence emerge as particularly salient when it comes to communicative situations within and across traditions:

> (1) *Eloquent silence.* This form of reticence is found both within religious and philosophical traditions (e.g., as strategies used to critique questions perceived as problematic) and in encounters between interlocutors in cross-traditional encounters (including opting-out, indications of dissent). Forms of eloquent silence in attempted dialogues may sometimes signal fundamental challenges to cooperative conversation.

(2) *Speech acts that implicate care about language use.* This sensibility is widespread across philosophical traditions but is relevant especially in connection to ethics within a way of life. This form of reticence is commonly found within religious and philosophical traditions (e.g., Biblical texts, Zen Buddhism, the *Analects*), indicating its potential relevance to inter-traditional encounters where common frames of reference will be at best partial.

(3) *Circumspection about sharing ideas.* While superficially similar to eloquent silence, circumspection concerns the value that is sometimes placed on the availability of certain teachings only to those who have otherwise achieved appropriate fluency or status within a discourse (e.g., the *Analects*, Dōgen, the Gospel of Mark). Circumspection is sometimes stated openly.

(4) *Declaration of Inexpressibility.* While topics such as inexpressibility and ineffability are frequently explored in studies of language in religious texts and mysticism, *declarations* of the limits of expressibility indicate a viewpoint on the limits of possible discourse. This form of reticence is quite common when it comes to descriptions of gods and other foci of worship or contemplation, but it is also frequently seen in connection with experiences of a rarified sort. When inter-traditional encounters attempt to bridge their respective understandings of ultimacies or experiences, this form of reticence might appear, both in connection with descriptions of ultimate reality and interlocutors protesting what they take to be misinterpretations of their beliefs, practices, or traditions.

(5) *Political Reticence.* While there are instances of political reticence arising within traditions (e.g., small or targeted sects within larger traditions), this dynamic is most obvious when religious and philosophical traditions encounter one another in larger social contexts (such as universities, cities, nations, and international arenas). Sometimes the cultural or political context will not be conducive in some respects to communication between religious interlocutors. Perhaps this form of reticence is similar to opting out in eloquent silences, but unlike eloquent silences, political reticence may aim at maintaining disagreements that are undetected by powerful interlocutors. It does not always aim at understanding.

The promise of inter-religious and cross-cultural communication is, among other things, to reinforce and perhaps even expand ideals of commonality: a common world, society, community; perhaps common concerns relating to ethics or faith. The deep challenges facing communication across boundaries of context indicate that alongside the ideals of commonality there are ideals of fidelity to tradition, autonomy, authenticity, and dignity. In *The Claim of Reason*, Stanley Cavell closely links "having a voice" with the others with whom one consents to associate, the others one acknowledges as being one's community. In envisioning inter-religious and cross-cultural communication, nested communities and commitments contextualize and

instantiate one another. The space of dialogue between interlocutors from different traditions is not a neutral space but is instead a context of communication itself, made possible by the interests, relative political power, and histories of the respective parties to the conversation. Participation in dialogue is potentially fraught, as interlocutors must balance the needs of fidelity to their communities, to themselves, and to performance within dialogue across traditions. Cavell writes,

> To speak for yourself then means risking the rebuff – on some occasion, perhaps once for all – of those for whom you claimed to be speaking; and it means risking having to rebuff – on some occasion, perhaps once for all – those who claimed to be speaking for you. There are directions other than the political in which you will have to find your own voice – in religion, in friendship, in parenthood, in love, in art – and to find your own work; and the political is likely to be heartbreaking or dangerous. So are the others. (Cavell 1979, p. 27)

The ideal of cross-traditional communication in religiously and culturally diverse contexts is admirable, but acknowledgement of fellow interlocutors from diverse worldviews is necessary for it to actually occur. Some forms of reticence are signs that acknowledgement has fallen short of what may have been needed; indeed, evident reticence may be a marker of a current impasse.

For those who want to increase the possibility of cross-tradition communication, one option is to work to create conditions conducive to social trust. This is not a naive or utopian call for parties to simply trust in one another; far from it, it is the recognition that without some minimal forms of trust, communication is not likely to be very successful (Carroll 2014, p. 169). Working to make social trust more warranted has no clear method. Sometimes in the structured environment of the university, it is possible in fleeting and fragile moments to establish trust both in the social environment and in the conceptual tools being used to parse religious and cultural traditions. Establishing trust in the possibility of critical inquiry into religious and cultural differences as well as in conversation partners, such as students and teachers, is one thing, but what is tentatively possible in a university setting is not likely to be easily achievable in unstructured environments, without institutional requirements and student motivation in learning. Histories and experiences with interlocutors can produce reasons to mistrust that themselves may become barriers to communication. Forms of reticence may appear to challenge mutual understanding, but they can also be openings to deeper levels of communication.

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