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SØREN KIERKEGAAARD’S COMMUNICATION THEORY: THE INDIRECT SPEECH

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I. Introduction : About reconsidering and revising your way of communicating.

Last Monday I was in Copenhagen at a conference about the future of The Danish Church. We do believe that The Danish Church has a future, but we are aware we are facing some challenges.

First, the relationship between the church and the Danes is being challenged. We have until now experienced a loyalty towards the church: 82% of the Danish population are members and pay church taxes. We don’t observe the same loyalty is towards Sunday services, though. It is not a new phenomenon. The Danes are called ‘four wheel Christians’. They have always come four times; for baptism, confirmation, weddings and funerals. And they still do. We still baptise, confirm, marry and bury most Danes and I know from my Anglican colleagues in North Camden Deanery in London that we should appreciate the high numbers of members who keep coming to the church at these occasions. We do, because this is where we get to meet people and get to talk to them about Christianity and church. But the number is declining.

Second, the relationship between church and state is, as some of you know, interesting and challenging! We have a church ministry, which is of course dealing with all kinds of religious affairs. There is of course freedom of religion, but the Danish Church, as the majority church, has a close relation to the parliament. The church does some administration for the state and vice versa, but this arrangement is probably not going to continue. The new generations of politicians are not necessarily members of the church, and not interested in the connection between church and state. They are more interested in all religions/churches being equal. It has been an issue, although a minor one, during the election champagne, and we now have a government which will probably begin a process towards separation of state and church.

I could mention a few other challenges, but that is not what I am here for today. But I mentioned the conference I attended because of something that happened there. In my workshop, where we were discussing communication, I was brutally attacked by a young colleague for being old fashioned and conservative. It hurt me really badly. I needed to lick my wounds a few seconds before I got hold of myself again. He was, of course, wrong! But he was not entirely wrong.

Having worked with communication in the church for 20 years doesn’t make you good at it, if you don’t adjust your theories of communication once in a while. Times change, and so do ways of communication. You can’t talk about God and believe in the same way at all times. You need to be aware of the times and conditions in which you are living.

I learned this from Søren Kierkegaard when I was a student. But you forget what you once learned, and now I had been reminded about it, thanks to my brutal colleague. And thanks to whoever got the idea I should do this talk today.

2. Søren Kierkegaard's Communication Theory: The Indirect Speech.

Sorry about this title. It is always difficult to decide on a title when you are asked to speak at a conference ahead of time, and you haven't decided what you are going to say! And it is even more difficult to find English words to cover what you mean! So I also considered: Preaching the bible; From written to oral word; Giving language to the sacred; Speaking about the unspeakable.

But I settled on 'Søren Kierkegaard's communication theory and practice: The indirect speech' so as to have something Danish in the title!

What I want to do is reflect on how we communicate the word of God. How do we talk about God and belief? How do we speak about the unspeakable? How do we preach the Bible? How do we come from the word read to the word preached? Kierkegaard had some theories about that, and the question is whether they might be useful in our ongoing reflection on our own practice of communication.

Søren Kierkegaard sees himself as Christian writer, and he is concerned with one issue. He calls it 'the Problem', and it is the problem of writing about how to become a Christian, and how to express things as an Author. His theory is that, about the unconditional, the absolute, religion and faith, there is no way of communication, not directly at least. This is indeed 'the problem' that Søren Kierkegaard deals with throughout his writing. In practice he finds many and different ways of doing it.

As a starting point he takes a good look at society, asking what kind of society it is, and what are the conditions under which people live? Søren Kierkegaard is very critical towards society in general. The loss of the sense of tradition, the loss of a sense of God, the loss of a sense of coherence in society and in human life, all this has served to make people selfish and without any feeling of need for community and with no sense of solidarity. The modern man is self-reliant - and lonely. Furthermore it has become increasingly difficult to reach people. The new media, the newspapers and the magazines, pollute and confuse society with so many words, none of which are heard because of the noise of too much information.

Søren Kierkegaard was also very critical towards the church, whose pastors, he thought, clung only to their salary and vicarage, not to their faith in God. They don't preach the Gospel. They are giving lessons from their pulpits, lessons in ethics, science, agriculture as well as Christianity. Theology had become pure science; faith and passion have left the church.

In contrast, Søren Kierkegaard saw himself as a Christian author, and he wanted to bring people back to what they had forgotten about God. The question was how? How to talk about faith to someone who didn't even ask? And how speak about the unspeakable?

He approached the problem in two ways: a poetic way and a common-sense way.

3 The poetic approach: The silence of Abraham - Fear and Trembling, 1843

Using a well-known Old Testament myth he illustrates the problem that there can be no communication about the religious. Or can there?

'Fear and Trembling' is written under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, and this is of course very significant. There is no way you can explain faith so that it makes sense. That is why the silent Johannes is telling the story.

A. Søren Kierkegaard wants to understand faith, how you enter into it or how it enters into you. For that purpose he examines the story about Abraham's apparent willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac, hoping to find an exemplar of faith to illustrate this. But how could Abraham become the father of faith? How could he obey God's irrational demand to offer his own son? And how could he, after having been on the mountain, having drawn the knife, having been willing to offer his son – how could he live normally with Sarah and Isaac after this? He was willing to lose everything on God's demand, how could he then gain everything? How can Abraham receive Isaac back and resume ordinary life with him, trusting in God's promise?

To approach this Johannes de Silentio talks about two worlds, the external, the public world and the spiritual, the religious world. His intention in talking about the two worlds is to emphasize that the individual, by excluding himself, may resign from the public. Only by means of faith he is able to come into a relationship with God.

By establishing an exceptional situation, Abraham becomes an exemplar of the individual, a religious existence. The exceptional situation in Abraham's case is that God, to test him, requires him to sacrifice Isaac. The demand is irrational, and Abraham can't justify the sacrifice on ethical, general motives, but only by the fact that God requires it from him. Obeying God is ignoring common, universal ethical rules – you don't kill your own son and get away with it, no matter what excuse you claim to have – and by suspending the common law he places himself outside society. There is no way of explaining this absurd demand of God and Abraham's absurd obedience.

"The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he intended to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he intended to sacrifice Isaac. But in this contradiction lies precisely the anxiety that indeed can make a person sleepless!" (Silentio, p.24)

Abraham is only able to do this through faith. Faith places him in an absolute relation to God, to the Absolute. As an individual, he resigns from the common, and unlike the relationship of faith, this resignation isolates him. What he has done, placing himself in this paradox, fills him with anxiety and distress.

To stand outside the community, the mainstream with all its common moral laws and rules, is also to stand outside the language. From a common point of view Abraham gives up faith for violence, and at that moment language becomes unusable. Therefore, Abraham is silent, he can't be otherwise. He cannot make himself understood.

The unique thing about Abraham is the process he passes through. He resigns himself to God's will by means of faith, he keeps his faith, lifts the knife - and gets everything back.

Resignation is the first step in the process Johannes de Silentio calls the double movement of faith. The first movement is the simple enough to perform. The other movement that puts Abraham in a position to return to the starting point as a whole person, with faith and Isaac intact, is made possible only by faith. This is absurd, a paradox. Only by God's help is salvation possible. "Faith is a paradox which is capable of making a murder into a holy act well pleasing to God, a paradox that gives Isaac back again to Abraham, which no thought can lay hold on because faith begins precisely where thinking ends " (p.46)

Faith enables Abraham's movement and makes him a "knight of faith", one who defies the disorder and the fear, the one who resigns from the universal community to become an individual.

'The double movement of faith' is what Søren Kierkegaard calls this process. This move is ne that every individual should make, away from ordinary life to face the paradox faith is, with all the anxiety and suffering that follows - to become a true person. Or, put another way, this is the process through which man is able to have a true relationship with God and become a true self.

There is no way to describe what happened in Abraham, how he won his son, himself and became knight of faith. Facing God one must be silent, but by breaking the silence, Johannes de Silentio reminds us indirectly about this demand to which we can only respond in faith.

But now the story about Abraham is told, the silent Johannes has spoken. Søren Kierkegaard's poetry has done something to us.

4. The common sense approach

In a writing a few years later, in 1951, "Til selvprøvelse. Samtiden anbefalet", Søren Kierkegaard - as himself and not his pseudonym - approaches this paradox in another way. First he tells the story about Socrates who, when accused for blasphemy and sentenced to death, rejects his friends offer to make a defense speech: "My Life is too serious to be supported by an orators Art," he said. This sentence expresses a schism, which appears at regular intervals in his writings, a schism in the form of the contradiction between life's absolute seriousness and the aesthetic eloquence with which Kierkegaard depicts this seriousness. Despite his distinct sense of and use of language Kierkegaard is constantly aware of its shortcomings when it comes to describing the absolute, the unconditional. The question is, how can one reasonably use aesthetics, the unserious, to describe ethics, the serious?

Kierkegaard distinguishes between communicating knowledge and communicating existence. You can communicate knowledge directly as knowledge; you can explain how to screw a nut, how to place books in alphabetical order, how to calculate the area in a triangle. That kind of knowledge can easily be taught directly. You can explain things like that objectively and in a monologue, lecturing. Knowledge can be communicated as knowledge, so that we have the same knowledge. But it is different when you come to communicating religion, which is about attitude and about values. It is a religious and ethical message: Go and do well. This cannot be communicated directly. There is no point in assuming that the opinion or interpretation I have, the meaning or the belief I have, can be transported, so to say, into another person, and to argue that he must have the same understanding or belief. Religious communication is not a one-way communication, it is a dialogue. When it comes to religious communication, Søren Kierkegaard is radical. It is not about transferring knowledge, but about bringing up something that is already – hidden – in a human

being. Speaking about religious communication Kierkegaard emphasizes that "Everyone has this the highest, the noblest and most sacred in him", and he continues, "But man does not want it." Every man has an understanding of the sacred, therefore it has to be brought up. And this is exactly what Søren Kierkegaard wants with his own writing. To wake up and bring up what is already present but forgotten in his reader.

So, Søren Kierkegaard's theory is that the religious cannot be communicated directly, and he practices numerous attempts to do so indirectly. Kierkegaard sees himself as a religious writer, with knowledge about human existence and about the sacred/the religious. And it is his wish to bring up this knowledge and to introduce or impose Christianity into Christendom. The entire writing is related to this issue: becoming a Christian. But how?

Christianity needs a *majeutiker*, a midwife who, like Socrates, could not teach people anything new, could not give them new knowledge, but could teach them so that they might discover that they can of what is already in them. For Socrates midwifery (*maieúesthai*) is a gracious act to redeem/deliver (someone who is giving birth). The idea is that Socrates in conversation can deliver someone who is already pregnant with knowledge, which he has forgotten and now must be assisted to recollect.

Christianity can't only be communicated as dogmatic, although this element of teaching Christianity of course is important and can be taught directly as knowledge. But when it comes to faith, to the relation between God and man, one must teach and educate, in the sense of drawing out what was previously hidden.

With this starting point Kierkegaard does not, of course, begin to lecture. Rather, he takes a good look at his contemporaries, sees that everything and everyone is living in an illusion and, based on his analysis of his contemporaries, he chooses his method, his communication theory.

So the aim is to lead people into Christianity, if necessary, to deceive them into the truth. Kierkegaard knows that he can't force people to believe, but he is convinced that he can force a person to become aware of faith, and to confront him with a decision. Therefore his entire purpose in writing is to attract attention, and he uses different methods for this purpose. He uses direct and indirect method, uses irony and humor, poetry and parody, he writes under pseudonym and in his own name, and he draws on a more or less familiar narrative and philosophical tradition. He provokes and analyzes, he convinces and seduces, all with one purpose in mind.

5. Our own practice

Like Kierkegaard, we have difficulty talking about the religious, but we have to and we want to anyway. For that reason we have to do as Kierkegaard did. We must have a close look at society and ask questions - what kind of society are we living in? We have to have a close look at the kind of human beings we are and what kind of listeners are we talking to? We need to know whom we are communicating with and what their conditions are. And what we see is, of course, very different from Søren Kierkegaard's time, but what he began to see (information society, loss of tradition, secularization, individualization) we now see at full blast.

Two modern words are describing some fundamental conditions in our society. First "hyper-complex" – which describes a very complex society, multicultural and multi religious. We are not in this society without a sense of community. But we don't have a sense of one community based

on church or local area or family. We belong to many communities, and we all take part in many different communities, the ones at our work, our children's school, our sports club and so on. We are all moving around in many communities, each of them having their set of rules and ethics. Communities are described as fluctuating, and we are described as nomads, moving around, changing surroundings and values all the time. The Church is no longer the local religious community. It is one of many - one institution among others, which offers – like other institutions – services. We are, as churches, subcultures, and our ability to communicate with other subcultures is vital if we are to survive.

Second, “information society”. Søren Kierkegaard saw the beginning; he would not want to be where we are today. An information society is a society in which the creation, distribution, diffusion, use, integration and manipulation of information is a significant economic, political, and cultural activity. There is a lot of information going on, and one would think that, in an information society, there would be trust in the spoken word. But this is not the case. We are experiencing a growing mistrust in the spoken word. In a media world, we are exposed to words of all kinds around the clock, including manipulative, noisy, empty and trivial words, and the result is that the louder people are shouting the more we are losing confidence that the words have any meaning at all.

So, if you are dealing with communication, you need to be aware of certain conditions. The recent General Election in Denmark is a very fresh memory, and reminds us that personality is really important. Through the media, we know the politicians quite well, sometimes better than our neighbour. We know what kind of schools they choose for their children, and we know when their private choices do not always correspond with their political ideals. We know of their private economy – also when it is a bit messy and not exactly corresponding with their political ideals. We know about their private relationships – when they are a bit messy, too. And these details count, to a certain extent, when we vote. We do not vote for someone we don't trust; the message has become secondary to the person. Who makes the most credible appearance? We are having a new government now, a red government. Our coming prime minister, who has a close connection to this country, would not have won the election if it had not been for a common need for change, but not least if it had not been for two very strong characters, both women - Vestager and Johanne Smidt. The first with a remarkably intellectual power and after some years struggling with an unpopular, academic and boring image, she is now scoring very, very high on credibility. The second, Johanne Smidt, young and pretty, but most of all she appears with a never failing smiling commitment – speaking with her whole body, smiling and laughing. She has high scores on credibility as well.

In the church and during a service why should it be different? If a speaker has sincerity he is trustworthy. This reliability does not appear extra-linguistically, but arises precisely because of what he says and does in our meeting with him, that's what my former bishop in Roskilde used to say. This goes for pastors as well.

Rhetorically speaking, you can't distinguish between a speaker and what he says. Is he proclaiming the Word of God, he speaks on behalf of God. It is that simple. Is what he is saying a lie? He has the devil and not God as his father! That's my bishop again.

If God has an unreliable preacher, he is himself untrustworthy. It is exactly the same as in politics, economy, culture, and so on. "The product" - to talk of merchandising - can be as good it will, but if no one believes in the presentation of it, they won't buy it.

Luther was aware of this. “What makes a good priest is a good head and a good voice”, he is supposed to have said. The voice is important – whether it sounds attractive or ugly. Body language is equally important. What the listener sees is very important. Does the preacher’s body language tell the listener that the message, the word read, is for him or for her, and that the message is not just boring information, but a personal message of utmost importance?

Søren Kierkegaard said that the New Testament should be read as the letter from the beloved, a message that has received the greatest interest.

6. Church, man, the listener.

What characterizes our listeners – or those we would like to come and listen? Who do we meet in the church? We meet the regulars; they come frequently and voluntarily. Then there are the visitors who come for one of the services we offer; christening, confirmation, marriage and funerals. Then we have the tourists. They are mostly invited to the church by the visitors or by the pastor who may have made up an event designed especially to attract them. They are either interested in participating in or they are trying to control their kids or persuade them to join in. Tourists are easily recognized by the cameras!

They have, all of them, the best intentions but, with the exception of a small number of the regulars, they often have difficulties matching the Church's language to their everyday language and experience. And if nothing of what is going on in the service and in the sermon has anything to do with their everyday life, there is no reason to come and they will not come again.

Our listener, or the one we would like to come and listen, lives in an individualized time in a hyper complex society - and that is a tough environment for anyone. People have to move around and adjust the best they can to changing times and changing communities. Ideals and values – all that people consider truth – is negotiable. Everybody talks about values, every organization, every school, every class – churches as well – all engage in debates in order to agree on a set of values. What is right and wrong is decided in democratic forums, and as soon as one set of values has been written down, it is soon forgotten.

There is not one god, one truth, one opinion; there are several and they are negotiable. What is true today may be superseded by something else tomorrow. Truth is redefined all the time and one must be prepared to adapt and change. It's not easy being human in a culture of self-realization.

It is a major task having to redefine yourself constantly and having to take responsibility for your own development. No wonder there is such a huge market for courses and mentors and coaches, all happy to help you develop your own perfect self. So modern man is engaged in a search for meaning. He has a lot of questions, and those who have the answers have the largest congregations. So, for example, Pentecostals are good at providing indisputable answers.

We must know the questions - and we do, for they are our own questions. I am my first reader, my first listener. We must take these questions seriously and know which ones we can and will answer.

7. So how do we communicate – how do we preach?

I would be professor and not just a pastor if I had clear answers here! But I think Søren Kierkegaard is an inspiration.

First, his sermons always began: "My listener". This is an important point. The listener should always be in our mind right from the beginning. The listener, and the congregation as a whole, are the source and originator - source of the service, not simply recipients of the service and the sermon.

Second, to Søren Kierkegaard a sermon is a conversation, not a lecture, not a monologue, but a genuine and proper conversation, which means an open conversation. A sermon should not explain, provide all the answers and close down the discussion. A sermon should offer reflection and open up possibilities. The result of good preaching is not a willingness to accept some position that has been prepared and presented by the preacher. It should result in a willingness to be moved or changed – and good preaching may challenge and change the preacher too!

Søren Kierkegaard does not succeed in 'Fear and Trembling' in explaining to us what faith is. But by using different pictures and settings, faith is illustrated. There is no information to be transmitted, but some forgotten knowledge to be drawn up, to be considered and a decision taken for or against.

This is an important point as well. Preachers can often be too focused on interpreting and making sure people understand. God's word should not be interpreted. It speaks for itself.

Reference is often made in the Lutheran world to "the ordinary priesthood", or "the priesthood of all believers", but we are nevertheless afraid to leave anything, even a conclusion of a sermon, to the churchgoers themselves. This reflects a deep and quite outdated lack of confidence in people's ability to think for themselves. In contrast, Jesus himself had great confidence in his listeners. He never asked whether they understood or understood correctly. More often he asked them what they thought, and challenged them to decide. There is, of course, an exception from this rule – the sower and the seeds spread in various types of ground. But otherwise he had an unbelievable confidence in the word pictures he presented.

1. Having the listener in mind always
2. Using all sorts of pictures, ways of speaking, indirectly, directly, using logic as well as poetic arguments.
3. Opening up instead of concluding.

These three would be three elements of inspiration from Søren Kierkegaard Communication Theory that I would commend to all who have been entrusted by God and his Church with the awesome task of preaching the Word.