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Gamaliel's Advice

or the Spirit of Detachment

The word "detachment" often evokes mixed feelings. It can carry the connotation of permanent loss, or of losing something for good. In popular language it is sometimes used as the counterpart of attachment and thus perceived as a negative phenomenon. Thus it can appear to be linked with an unhealthy spirituality, marked by exaggeration. When used out-of-context, the term can also evoke an atmosphere of indifference, non-participation and unaccountability. Apart from detachment which is harmful and vain, there is a creative detachment, too. It does not have its primary source in refusal, but in acceptance. It can seem paradoxical to speak of attachment and detachment at the same time, but in a closer perspective this paradox reveals its meaning and depth.

A TWO-LAYER MOVEMENT

It seems that the detachment Jesus speaks of in the Bible is a detachment that produces paradoxical effects. Jesus speaks of giving up one's father, mother, wife, children, etc. (Lk 14,26; Mk 10,28-30) for the sake of the kingdom of heaven and promises that it will be returned one hundred fold already in this life. Throughout the centuries, these few lines have inspired numerous authors to look for a consistent explanation of the *movement of detachment*.

Stepping back and considering the negative features of one's own character enables one to become more mature in certain areas of behavior, decision-making or formation of attitudes. But why do authors like *Meister ECKHART* speak about the detachment from one's own knowledge, plans, dreams, friends, spouse and even from God?

The movement of detachment can be seen as a two-way movement. Therefore, at the end of the day, it is not about losing. Losing, or rather giving up, is for the sake of getting back. *Søren KIERKEGAARD* likens this giving up and getting back to Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. In the end, the sacrifice was not about losing. This *movement of faith* can contribute to the awareness that authentic detachment carries in itself the notion of getting back what has been given up. The maturity of one's relationship with God increases as one becomes aware of the fact that God *really* takes care. One gives up an idol (defined God), illusion (defined love) and projection (defined partner) and gradually begins to discover how God, love and the partner really are when one opens up to listen to their silent voices.

In this way one can become *detached from her or his own definitions* of what God, the partner or love are about. Instead of fixed answers (that have been given up) one keeps an open heart and mind to learn again and again new things about God, the partner or love. In other words, one remains *ever-listening*.

In his sermons, *Meister ECKHART* pays a great deal of attention to the phenomenon of detachment. Knowing that the movement of detachment can be easily misinter-

preted and driven to an unhealthy extreme, he tries to elaborate on how the movement of detachment can become a bridge which enables the soul to walk into God's inner self.

The fact that the entire creation is secondary in relation to God does not mean that one can discard the creation and thus come closer to God. Creation, as an outflow of God's love, wants to be taken seriously. The advice of Jesus that one should seek detachment from her or his husband or wife, parents, children, etc. means thus in this sense that one should avoid projecting divine attributes onto them. If one does not absolutize human beings, if one does not seek the meaning of life in things and humans, but reserves this to the *Divine presence* in them, one seeks detachment.

RELATIONAL MATURITY AND OSSIFIED OPINIONS

Erich FROMM, when analyzing relational patterns, draws inspiration from *ECKHART*'s notion of detachment. In the case of most intensive relationships (family and partner relationships) the notion of immature expectations and absolutization of partial values appears as a frequent phenomenon. Cases of exaggerated possessiveness, extreme expectations, unrealistic certainty and projections of absolute values occur as regular phenomena. Forcing one's own ideas and projections on one's partner, child or parent decreases the possibility of authentic knowledge of the other's inner life. *Detachment from ambitions, plans and dreams* plays in many relationships a decisive role in accepting the other. In this way one does not turn the other into an object of an ambition, plan or dream of her or his own.

It is only natural that one shapes opinions on people, things and God. Opinions are assessments based on experience. Some opinions, however, become *ossified*, especially if there is no more lively dialogue to keep them fresh and accurate. Since it is often difficult to assess in what measure opinions (even if fresh and up-to-date) reflect the authentic motives of other people, *detachment from opinions* opens up an important platform for ever-adjusting knowledge of the other. This, of course, does not mean that one holds no stable opinions, rather that one is aware of the limited depth of her or his own experience, insight and understanding.

DETACHMENT AS THE EVER-ADJUSTING ATTITUDE

In the first place, it has already been hinted that detachment means an opening up to be able to listen and learn ever anew. When one waits—listening to hear the voice of the other—one gradually "hears" words, emotions, images and glimpses that ever-adjust her or his attitudes. Detachment can be also *described as non-*



attachment to changing things. In this way it becomes clear that an ongoing dialogue is intrinsically linked to the phenomenon of detachment.

One needs permanent dialogue to be able to listen on one hand and share on the other. Fixed opinions and attitudes, especially if based on half-truths and conjectures, can become dangerous prejudice. Fixed opinions and attitudes based on authentic dialogue can become artifacts, if the dialogue is interrupted and no longer nourished.

ECUMENISM – AIRING OF A MUSEUM

It is no secret that after the various divisions of the universal Church, the churches were quick to peg each other as heretical, unauthentic and faithless. Authentic dialogue was blocked, or else concerned only a small minority of believers. Religious persecutions and wars were at times clear manifestations of *attachment to fixed opinions and attitudes*. The enemy seemed to be clearly defined. Self-criticism was often absent and the others were often defined on the basis of one's own projections and conjectures. When the representatives of the churches of the West and the East met in the Middle Ages (eg. at the Council of Florence), they quickly discovered how little they knew about each other.

Attachment to clear-cut definitions often simplified the complexity of the other's motives and left no space for modifications of one's own opinions. The phenomenon of negative definitions (what the others lack) brought about the concentration on the differences, rather than on what still remained as the common heritage. *Being-in-separation* often overshadowed the Christian interbeing, ie. being-in-connection.

Attachment to ambitions and plans frequently determined precisely what the others should do, if they are to be authentic again. This left little space for suggestions from the other side and presented unfeasible conditions of unification. In practice, the fact that the opinions on other churches did not change for several centuries meant that, in certain instances, medieval opinions were conserved and the common line of development was cut.

When the ecumenical leaders of the 20th century tried to advocate before their own churches the importance of the dialogue with other Christian traditions, their struggle often resembled Don Quixote's fight with the windmill.

The authentic, thorough and long-term ecumenical dialogue, founded and developed by visionary personalities as Nathan SÖDERBLOM, Willem VISSER 'T HOOFT or Yves CONGAR brought about an airing of the museum opinions that had remained as fossils untouched for several hundreds of years.

INTERBEING, DIALOGUE AND UNITY

The idea of *interbeing*, as developed and applied by THICH NHAT HANH or Adrián SLAVKOVSKÝ, claims the permanence of our being-in-connection. Even if two entities claim to live in separation, they remain connected. The connection can be ignored, buried and negated, but it cannot be destroyed. Through the negation, however, the coming together at a later date is

made more difficult and complex. The fact that the connection remains, whether cultivated or left uncultivated, shows that dialogue is important even in periods when it seems to bear no fruits.

On the other hand, Martin BUBER warns us that the human capacity for authentic dialogue is limited by circumstances. This means that it would be illusory to expect a fruitful dialogue to remain as it is forever. An *I-Thou* relationship evolves necessarily into an *I-It* relationship at a later date. If this admonition of BUBER is to be taken seriously, it is to imply that deep dialogue and serious detachment are not one-time processes, but rather dynamic processes which need constant care. The awareness of being-in-connection with *the other* is transforming, but it is not an inborn physical urge.

Detachment, as it has been presented, represents a deconstruction of certain types of illusions, projections, self-made images, definitions, etc. and thus it becomes in practice a deconstruction of barriers. It increases the awareness of interbeing (being-in-connection), because it intrinsically looks for it. Interbeing and authentic detachment naturally converge.

GAMALIEL'S "UNFINISHED" OPINION

A most intriguing example of detachment from one's own opinions, definitions and limits can be found in the Acts of the Apostles. Rabbi Gamaliel, one of the Pharisees, stands up in the Sanhedrin to present his attitude towards the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. His prophetic words speak for themselves and sum up all of this essay:

„People of Israel, *be careful how you deal* with these people. Some time ago there arose Theudas. He *claimed* to be someone important, and collected about four hundred followers; but when he was killed, all his followers *scattered* and that was the end of them. And then there was Judas the Galilean, at the time of the census, who attracted crowds of supporters; but he was killed too, and all his followers dispersed. What I suggest therefore, is that you leave these men alone and let them go. If this enterprise, this movement of theirs, is of human origin it will break up of its own accord; but if it does in fact come from God you will be unable to destroy them. Take care not to find yourselves fighting against God.“ (Acts 5:34-39)

Suggested Reading

BUBER Martin, *Das dialogische Prinzip* (The Dialogical Principle). Heidelberg, 1984.

KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Frygt og Bæven* (Fear and Trembling). København, 1962.

Meister ECKHART, *Deutsche und Lateinische Werke* (German and Latin Works). Frankfurt, 1995.

Fromm Erich, *Die Kunst des Liebens* (The Art of Loving). Frankfurt, 1979.

SLAVKOVSKÝ Adrián, *Blížkosť* (Closeness). Bratislava, 2001.

THICH NHAT HANH, *Being Peace*. Berkeley, 1987.

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