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### Listening in Religious Education: The Gift of Self in the Face of Uncertainty

**Abstract.** This paper ushers religious education into a debate regarding the apophatic as opposed to the exclusively cataphatic nature of listening. It traces the contours of this debate and presents a way through by situating it relative to studies of listening that have been conducted in the fields of philosophy and religion. Drawing on the work of Gabriel Moran concerning the call and response structure of revelation and responsibility, it suggests that listening is an exercise in responsibility, and that listening is best described as the gift of self in the face of uncertainty.

This paper begins an attempt to bring the resources of religious education to bear on the neglect of listening. It is a curious aspect of education—religious or otherwise—that listening, while the most utilized communication skill, is the least taught. This inverted curriculum persists because we assume that we listen much better than in point of fact we do. Listening is also subject to a negative correlation—the more teachers talk, the less students listen—which worsens as students progress in their schooling. Scholars in the field of education began to examine listening fifteen years ago, but they took aim at neither listening’s inverted curriculum nor its negative correlation. Instead, they sought to understand the role that listening plays in bridging differences and fostering democratic notions of participation and equity. Their efforts resulted in the publication of two books, three special journal issues, and a handful of other essays.<sup>1</sup>

For their part, religious educators have had relatively little to say about the topic. Yet if listening is critical to teaching-learning—Parker Palmer has said that “the first task of an educator is not to talk but to listen” (2010)—then it will be important for religious educators to engage listening as a topic of research, a curricular concern, and a pedagogical disposition, lest our efforts remain structurally undermined from the very beginning. Toward that end, this paper will review the debate that has arisen in the field of education over whether listening is apophatic or exclusively cataphatic in nature (section one). It will then forge a way through by situating the debate relative to philosophical and religious studies of listening (section two). It will conclude by introducing the notion of listening as responsiveness with the aid of Gabriel Moran’s work concerning the call and response structure of revelation (section three). It suggests that as an exercise in responsibility, listening is best described as the gift of self in the face of uncertainty.

#### The Debate

Leonard Waks, professor emeritus of educational leadership at Temple University, initiated the debate over the apophatic as opposed to the exclusively cataphatic nature of listening. Put briefly, listening is cataphatic when it proceeds by means of pre-conceived categories; it is apophatic when it lays categories of interpretation aside. Waks distinguished these forms of listening from one another in response to a position that Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon, professor of education and social policy at Northwestern University, had set forth in her

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Katherine Schultz, *Listening: A Framework for Teaching Across Differences* (2003: New York, Teachers College Press), *Learning Inquiry* (2007, vol. 1, no. 2), *Teachers College Record* (2010, vol. 112, no. 11), and *Education Theory* (2011, vol. 61, no. 2).

2003 presidential address to the Philosophy of Education Society. In that address and in subsequent responses to Waks, Haroutunian-Gordon argues that every act of listening implies a question. Since we listen to understand, and since all understanding is predicated on questioning (a position that Haroutunian-Gordon adopts from Hans-Georg Gadamer), it follows that all listening entails questioning. Hence Haroutunian-Gordon's central claim that, "when one listens to a challenging view, it is because one is trying to resolve a question and seeks help in doing so" (2010, 2793).

It seems counterintuitive that what should motivate us to listen is not the desire to learn what the other values and thinks, but the desire to "resolve a question," meaning specifically our own question. In Haroutunian-Gordon's view, though, the school (the principal context of her research is teacher preparation programs) exists as an institution of democracy. As such, it serves to create meaning between people, not simply to foster familiarity with, much less adherence to, another person's view. To be sure, it's critical that we understand what the other says. However, questioning facilitates this more than listening because when we raise for inspection, and potential contradiction, our own tacit beliefs, we recognize the values and thinking that pose an obstacle to the creation of meaning between conversants. Concentrating on our own questions occasions the rude awakening, as it were, that makes us aware of how incomplete our understanding is. "When we open for question the truth of our prejudices, we allow the object to speak—to tell us what it can and in so doing, help us to evaluate whether our previously held, and perhaps heretofore unrecognized, convictions (prejudices) are justified true beliefs" (Haroutunian-Gordon 2007, 149). In short, we listen to another perspective not for its own sake, but because doing so enables us to discover the concerns of self that pose obstacles to the dialogue on which tolerance is predicated.

The principal problem with this view, according to Waks, is that it rests on the unwarranted presumption that "the human organism's every input has to be processed by conscious cognitive activity" (2007, 160). Indeed, the cognitive nature of Haroutunian-Gordon's listening model is apparent in its similarity to the Socratic method. There, questioning is the only legitimate means by which unidentified belief can be brought to the surface and influenced to change. Only when questioning has made us aware of our tacit beliefs can we decide whether we are justified in holding them. In contrast, Waks argues that listening functions at preconscious levels, where it is not attenuated by a constant internal dialogue of questions and categories. He draws on the experiences of artists, physicians, and athletes, as well as teachers, to demonstrate this, which he likens to intuition.

Waks characterizes the intuitive-like nature of listening as the habituation of prior learning. It functions not unlike an automatic reflex, and is evident in situations of mastery and expertise, where "conscious contents are channeled directly, without further cognitive mediation, to long-term memory, where they are subjected to multiple processes that become more effective with experience" (Waks 2007, 160). That listening can operate like intuition suggests that "knowing" transcends the cognitive. "Knowing a person is not construable as knowing a set of descriptive propositions.... Knowledge of a person may be ineffable—words may be inadequate to express it" (Waks 2010, 2748). Such knowing requires laying aside values and beliefs because, as much as we rely heavily on categorical distinctions to deal with myriad stimuli, hypotheses, and ambiguities, we also recognize that shortcuts, which categories provide, can be misleading, as when we think in terms of stereotypes.

Waks refers to the process of laying aside such categories as apophatic listening. Apophatic listening is a-categorical insofar as it suspends or withholds responses to stimuli, even

to the point of remaining still in the face of uncertainty. In the abstract this means that we no longer question whether X is a case of Y or Z. It may or may not be, but for the time being we are content to be indifferent to that knowledge. In practice this occurs when we lay aside the beliefs and values that are inherent to the roles we occupy. Roles, Waks observes, “employ criteria to sort utterances into predetermined categories that are linked to established practical response types... When listeners lay aside their roles and practical interests, however, they *eo ipso* lay aside or suspend the category schemata ordinarily brought into play by them and also the action steps following on those categorizations” (2010, 2748). It is to such a process that empathy, for example, rightly refers when it speaks of the ability to lay aside one’s viewpoint in order to adopt that of another.

Though it seems valuable, is it possible to lay aside one’s roles, beliefs, and values? Haroutunian-Gordon responds in the negative. She argues that what listeners experience when they appear to do so is merely a shift from one set of categories to another, with questions underlying every new set. However, Waks characterizes the apophatic from a vantage point that is not readily accounted for in Haroutunian-Gordon’s framework. Specifically, he offers evidence from spirituality, psychotherapy, and the arts. These fields demonstrate that listeners can be characterized by a general emptiness, suspend judgment so as to proceed without prefigured standards, and experience new possibilities of expression.

The first characteristic can be seen in mystical contemplation, where there is “no longer any expectancy of or receptivity to a certain kind of message, or even a desire for any kind of result” (Waks 2010, 2753). Such emptiness, Waks demonstrates, is characteristic of the preparation for teaching that Socrates, Jesus, and Gautama underwent. The emptiness of their radical openness to reality “cut through the dualism of subject/object and self/other... and made possible the unencumbered participation in the infinite intelligence and dynamic creativity that lies beyond well-bounded individual selves, at the core of being” (Waks 1995, 95). The second characteristic can be seen in therapeutic practices, where listeners, such as counselors or supervisors, bracket the values and beliefs that are associated with their roles so as to ready themselves to accept the other’s inner life in much the same manner “as the contemplative waiting in silence is ready to accept God” (2010, 2754). The third characteristic can be seen in music and literature, where listening is manifest by creative responses. Waks describes this in terms of the listener becoming “an empty womb”—like the echo chamber of a violin—that gives “birth to a newborn speaker” (2010, 2755).

### A Way Through

One way through the debate is to broaden the perspective from which we view listening. This brings into consideration the research that began well before scholars of education took up the topic, and research that goes on outside the field of education. Indeed, research into what constitutes listening took place as early as the 1920s under the aegis of communication studies, where listening research originated. Taken as a whole, this research testifies to how difficult it has been to achieve conceptual clarity about listening. For instance, over the course of the 20th century scholars of communication approached listening first as a measurable activity, next as a teachable skill, and finally as a multi-staged process. These different approaches were largely determined by the contexts in which listening was being examined—daily activity, classroom teaching, and cognitive models, respectively.

Listening research was eventually taken up by academic philosophers. To be sure, the giants of philosophy have had insights into listening, but they never concerned themselves with it

systematically. In the 1990s, though, two scholars recognized that listening had previously been incorporated into the notion of rationality (Levin 1989; Corradi Fiumara 1990). However, contemporary rationality has emphasized speaking over listening, thereby neglecting the power that listening exercised in early Greek notions of rationality to gather, to keep together, and to pay heed—all dispositions that are critical to meaning. In philosophy, the research concern has been ontological rather than epistemic. Rather than being concerned with questions of how we know what listening is, it has followed the principle that to understand what it means to listen we must first be concerned with who we are and who we become when we do or do not listen. By assuming an ontological perspective, these scholars have argued that if it is the case that “language is the house of Being,” as Martin Heidegger states, then rationality leaves the human person and human society in an underdeveloped, perhaps even malformed, state when it neglects language’s listening half.

Listening is perhaps even more foundational to religion than it is to rationality when we take into account Abraham Heschel’s observation that “philosophy begins with man’s question; religion begins with God’s question and man’s answer” (1951, 76). This means that religion is predicated on listening, for it “begins with a consciousness that something is asked of us... a question addressed to us. All that is left to us is a choice—to answer or to refuse to answer. Yet the more deeply we listen, the more we become stripped of the arrogance and callousness which alone would enable us to refuse” (1951, 68-69). Prophets are those most affected by such a consciousness. The prophet’s ear, Heschel says, “is attuned to a cry imperceptible to others” (1962, 7).

In short, prophets are listeners par excellence. Whereas philosophers *question*, prophets *respond*. Indeed, the voice of the prophet is a singular reverberation of the Lord’s. According to Heschel, “the invisible God becomes audible” in the prophet’s words (1962, 22). His prophecy, which includes the totality of his life, adjures the people to heed to the word of God that he himself has heard (note that Heschel examines only male prophets). The prophet issues the call to listen with integrity because he himself is preeminently a listener: he responds to what he has heard by dedicating his life to it. Prophecy, then, has at least a partial aim to model for God’s people what it means to listen—to respond to the divine voice by embracing what it proclaims.

Hebrew scripture employs at least three verbs to describe the prophet enjoining people to listen: *azan* (to give ear), *qashab* (to incline the ears), and *shama* (to hear). The most frequent among them is the latter, which translates as hear, listen, hearken, and obey. Though *shama* is used to convey this range of related activities, its quintessential usage can be found in the prayer known by the very word itself, namely, the Shema. The Shema is a scriptural prayer by which observant Jews attune their life to the word of God at the start and end of each day. It begins with the interjection “Hear, O Israel!” (Deut. 6:4). This formulation resonates throughout the accounts of Israel’s prophets as part of an introduction to oracles. Because they are formulated in the imperative mood, these formulations do not merely appeal for attention. Nor are they peremptory. Rather, they serve to convict the hearts of a people who have transgressed the covenant relationship. For example, when the prophet Jeremiah says “Listen [*shama*] to the word of the LORD, house of Jacob! All you clans of the house of Israel, thus says the LORD” (2:4) he effectively serves God’s people with a subpoena. They are to appear before the Lord, as if in court, to be indicted for their infidelity, apostasy, and idolatry.

What enables the word *shama* to convey such a wide array of meaning? It is the basic principle that listening is fundamental to the social order, which is ultimately established by divine word. In this view, there would be chaos and folly, not order and wisdom, if the ancient

Israelites did not listen to the Lord. Because God remains essentially unseen, it is necessary to listen for and to the voice of the Lord. Indeed, the Mosaic law goes so far as to depict a lack of listening as giving free rein to chaos that it prescribes capital punishment for “a stubborn and rebellious son who will not listen to his father or mother” (Deut. 21:18). In contrast, “the wise by hearing [proverbs] will advance in learning, / the intelligent will gain sound guidance” (Prov. 1:5).

### A Way Forward

When we recognize how prophecy is predicated on listening—an activity that ranges from hearing the divine word to responding to it—we are led to consider whether religion in general is not also predicated on listening. After all, the listening that the prophet epitomizes is the goal for all God’s people, and what brings this goal to fulfillment is religion. Religion is, in other words, a response to divine initiative. Prophets go about intensifying this response by deepening the people’s listening. Perhaps no religious educator has done more to intensify *response-ability* than Gabriel Moran. Indeed, he argues that the responsibility “underlies the Jewish and Christian sense of what a human being is: the being who listens and responds to the one who is creator of the universe” (2002, 136). For this reason, Moran describes listening as the first moment of responsibility, emphasizing that being responsive *to* someone is a condition for assuming responsibility *for* oneself. Moran is well known for his early writings on revelation, of course, but by turning to responsibility in later writings he has put the two terms into a mutually clarifying interplay. Responsibility rests on an earlier, Hebrew-rooted oral/aural metaphor for divine communication, while the revelation rests on a more recent, Greek-rooted visual metaphor. Though the latter metaphor has been predominant for millennia, Moran uses responsibility’s more primary metaphor to interpret visually-based revelation as a relation of presences, in other words, as a divine-human relation of call and response rather than a deposit of abstract propositions.

Put briefly, listening is an exercise of responsibility for those who seek to be responsive to divine mystery. Thomas Merton describes this succinctly when he writes, “My life is a listening. [God’s] is a speaking. My salvation is to hear and respond” (1976, 74). It would not, then, be too much to speculate, as a point on which to conclude, that listening might best be described from the point of view of religious education as the gift of self in the face of uncertainty. When we recognize that listening is a response to mystery, we recognize that listening is largely dependent on our comfort level with uncertainty. Research has shown, for instance, that if we minimize our exposure to uncertainty, we tend to manifest an overriding concern for identity (Michel and Wortham 2011). As a result, we listen cataphatically, and lends itself toward the reification of experience, the objectification of knowledge, and abstraction from presence. However, if we are willing to amplify uncertainty because we perceive that something lies within it that beckons us forward and bodes us well, then we tend to be motivated for mission. In other words, we listen apophatically so as to respond to that which calls us into being. In this we can recognize that apophatic listening, especially as it is exemplified by prophets, manifests the human desire to be grasped by the experience of knowing and by the known, rather than to know. For this reason, religious educators will likely find it profitable to retrieve from the treasury of religious education elements of a once-vital listening culture—in particular, dialogue, obedience, and contemplation. These practices can serve the discipline as listening pedagogies, and have the potential to answer the debate that has arisen over whether listening is apophatic or exclusively cataphatic in nature.

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