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Robert Maldonado is Professor of Philosophy at California State University, Fresno. His research interests focus on autobiographical hermeneutics and the use of the Bible in Latin American identity. Since becoming chair of his department in 1998, he mostly teaches “Literature of the Bible” and occasionally courses on Tolkien and philosophy of science and religion.

My recent research explores the dynamics of silence and voice in the Gospel according to Mark, raising questions of ownership (who has a voice and who does not) and questions of power (who controls voice — one’s own or others’ — and who cannot). My concern with questions of power and ownership around voice stem from several interconnected reasons. I grew up in a first-generation United States family. My brother and I learned English as a first language. We acculturated into middle-sector Anglo culture from a working-class background. I have light skin. Throughout my formative academic study, my Latin-American heritage and its voices were irrelevant.

After a brief sojourn teaching at an elite liberal arts college, I secured my current teaching position at California State University, Fresno, a working-class public university in the great Central Valley. White students make up 37–44 percent of the student body and women 60 percent; almost half are first-generation college students. Students in Fresno Unified School District speak 101 languages. According to the U.S. Census, more than one-fifth of the region’s population lives below the poverty level. With this linguistic, ethnic, and class diversity comes considerable religious diversity, but the region also represents California’s Bible Belt. Higher education professionals often talk about the value of diversity and simultaneously lament its absence in most colleges; few professors actually live and work within such a diverse environment as Fresno.

Given how my own and my people's voices have been silenced historically, I am sensitive to issues of voice and silence, both mine and that of my students. I want to ensure my classroom becomes a space in which each student's voice is valued. I am aware of the power and privilege that the institution grants me as professor in terms of classroom dynamics. Yet frankly, at times I want to silence some of those who expect class to be nothing different from Bible studies at their church, and uncomfortable confrontations do sometimes happen. In spite (or because?) of this, I am committed to the progressive pedagogy model of Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire (1970), which emphasizes dialogue and concern for the oppressed.

Attending to who is speaking and who is not is a step, but it is a dependent step; noticing who has a voice or not is first contingent on hearing and position. If the failure to hear has little consequence, it reveals the power of the person failing to hear. Position is also a function of community; one may have freedom or power to exercise voice within one's group, family, or community, but elsewhere that same person may be silent or silenced.

Silence and voice can thus have different values. For example, the use of voice to silence another may be negative if it seeks to stifle the other. On the other hand, silence can be an intentional strategy to resist the eliciting of a co-opted voice. Thus, silence, like voice, can be imposed or voluntary. Not all silence/ing is bad; not all voice/ing is good. More inquiry into the context, extent, and purpose is needed to determine value.

My "New Testament" class is made up of conservative Protestants, Catholics for whom the Bible is a non-Western text, members of various other religions, as well as nonreligious and even antireligious students. Both literature majors and philosophy/ religious studies majors enroll in it. Negotiating the content — let alone the issues of silence and voice — is to walk a pedagogical razor's edge. Strategies aimed at opening up one segment of the class can work against opening up other groups. Sometimes I deliberately silence students so that others might speak, yet I confess that at times I also silence students from frustration or anger. At times, I worry that my attempts to elicit voice from some silent students might themselves be part of a complex dynamic in which my coaxing paradoxically accomplishes the opposite intention by rendering their voices less authentic, less "theirs." I wonder: do they lie or misrepresent their voice out of fear of a lower grade?

I see parallels between my pedagogy and research. The Gospel according to Mark exhibits different examples of silence and voice. Some characters silence others; some ask questions to elicit a response from the silent, and some choose to remain silent in response to probing questions. Motives are not always explicit. Just like many of my students, some characters in the Gospel have little to say. Jesus appears to talk the most, yet the truly dominant voice is

often unnoticed; Jesus is allowed less than three-eighths of the words in the Gospel, and totaled together, all the other characters combined get less than one-eighth. Thus over half the Gospel is literally in the voice of the narrator, Mark, and in an important sense, all of the words — even those he cites — are his, for it is he who has selected which quotes to include or exclude, which voices to privilege or to silence.

Mark uses two different verbs for silencing depending on the subject and object. When Jesus silences demons, he rebukes them (1:25; 3:12; 4:39; 9:25). When he silences humans, he orders them (5:43; 7:36; 9:9). Silencing demons tends to succeed; silencing humans does not. The one time Jesus rebukes a human it is Peter, with both trying to silence the other (8:30, 32f). There are only two places where humans are the subject of “rebuking” other humans (10:13, 48). Jesus’s rebuke of Peter (as demon) becomes a bad model for the disciples to treat other humans as demonic rather than the more limited case of ordering others to be silent.

There are several ways these instances of silencing in Mark pertain to the classroom. One model is the more tempting and perhaps even “natural,” which is for the professor to cast him - or herself into the role of Jesus, whether consciously or unconsciously. Jesus is a Power, the Teacher is a Power. It is perhaps no coincidence that with just a single exception of Jesus’s self-reference in the third person, every instance of Jesus being referred to as “the Teacher” is within a context in which the character is misunderstanding Jesus. Thus, the depiction of Jesus as “Teacher” in Mark reveals an irony that illustrates the failure to learn. To model oneself on Jesus as Power, as the Teacher, would instead cast us into the role of the flummoxed disciples, i.e., unwittingly rebuking other human beings because we presumptively think we know how things should be understood or what should be done. Along the way, we end up teaching that such rebukes of others are appropriate and to be expected. We inadvertently become poor models of silencing. This emerges in the context of failed voices (mine and my students) in the classroom, strategic silences as responses to attempted eliciting of voice, with others resisting all the more loudly from being demonized. At the same time, one can say that the demonic can get instantiated in, for example, patriarchy and racism, whose institutions and structures render some people without voice and others with excess voice deserving of rebuke.

In an important sense, Mark is not an individual exerting power over the narrative; rather, the author is a community. The story emerges from a community, out of its needs, concerns, and values, and speaks back to that context. If this analysis has any merit, it suggests that Mark’s community implicitly or explicitly attended to the dynamics of silence and voice via the characterizations in the Gospel. It is the whole of the community that corresponds to the whole of the story.

My view is that the voice in the classroom should be more like Mark, the community. As a community together, the classroom should attend to the dynamics of silence and voice, recognizing the debilitating effects of racism, patriarchy, and classism, and responding together to the liberating potential of learning through dialogue with respect. I try to use my patriarchal privilege to opt out of patriarchal privilege: it is my responsibility to build the conditions of a participative community wherein all class members may engage in dialogue, share authentically based on lived experience, and through this process develop a consciousness with the power to transform their reality. It is such a community that should silence the demons of racism, patriarchy, and classism, not the privileged few or the one. It is such a community that should elicit expressions of voice (and silence) from its members, not the privileged few or the one.

Bibliography

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum International Publishing Group, 1970.