

How to talk theology with other Christians:

Resonance, dissonance, and non-sonance

How often we bump into unexpected obstacles in our efforts to communicate the theology of our religions! Sometimes we pick ourselves up and keep trying; other times the results are so painful and disastrous, we vow never to talk religion again.

One of the most helpful guides I've found in this sometimes bewildering conversation comes from a four-page paper titled "Theological Language and Ecumenical Methodology" written by John T. Ford for the Faith & Order Commission of the NCC.

He describes the conversation about religion as people learning to speak to each other in foreign languages. There are three kinds of words that help in the learning process: "resonance," "dissonance," and "non-sonance."

Resonance is the happy discovery of words that may sound different but really mean the same thing. Like, "father" or "padre" or "pere" in English, Spanish, or French. Resonance reminds us to look for places of agreement. Quakers and Christian Scientists are both comfortable without clergy, for example.

Dissonance is the realization that look-alike words have very different meanings and must be understood in their differences. For example, the word "coin" in French does not refer to money; it's a corner. Dissonance reminds us to the words that have different meanings and learn what they are. Sacrament is important in Christian Science, but sacrament has a very different meaning for Catholics.

Non-sonance is obviously a made-up word, helping us remember there are three important steps to understanding someone else's religious vocabulary. These are words that really don't exist in the other person's language. English-speaking people borrow words from other languages when that other language expresses it better than can be done in English. Nonsonance reminds us there are times we need to look beyond our own religious experience to understand the meaning of another's religious experience. An example of this is that in Christian Science, the term "man" refers to God's perfect, spiritual image and likeness. The meaning of that word doesn't exist exactly that way in most other Christian vocabularies.

If you'd like to read the full 5-page description of this resonance-dissonance-nonsongance concept, go to this [Faith & Order page online](#), and scroll to the bottom link, called "Faith and Order Commission Handbook." When you download the handbook, go to page 20. You might even enjoy browsing around the entire handbook, to get more ideas about ecumenical conversation.