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# RITUAL MANAGEMENT OF PRESENCE AND ABSENCE: THE LITURGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SILENCE

DAVID L. JOHNS

*[This article is a slightly revised version of a paper presented at the 1996 Quaker Theological Discussion Group Conference held at George Fox University.]*

## INTRODUCTION

Silence is not monolithic. Like many phenomena that present themselves to us in the religious life, silence has a duality about it, a rich character that cannot be captured adequately in one angle of description. Silence as it plays itself out in the context of worship simply confirms this. Like early Quaker discussions of the Light as both “power and terror,”<sup>1</sup> silence too speaks powerfully and terrifyingly by speaking loudly of both Presence and Absence. Presence can be power-full and Absence can be terror-full; the opposite may be true as well.

Beyond the matter of silence in particular, these two poles represent a classic description of God and God’s knowability. God is both *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus*. This dilemma is present in the corporate gathering for worship. The intention of invocational prayers in liturgical traditions is to invite Presence; communing with bread and wine is to ingest Presence. Caroline Stephen’s familiar account of her first experience in a Quaker meeting for worship speaks well of this invitation and this openness to Presence:

When I, on one never-to-be-forgotten Sunday morning, I found myself one of a small company of silent worshippers who were content to sit down together without words, that each one might feel after and draw near to the Divine Presence, unhindered at least, if not helped, by any human

utterance. Utterance I knew was free, should the words be given; and before the meeting was over, a sentence or two were uttered in great simplicity by an old and apparently untaught man, rising in his place amongst the rest of us. I did not pay much attention to the words he spoke, and I have no recollection of their purport. My whole soul was filled with the unutterable peace of the undisturbed opportunity for communion with God—with the sense that at last I had found a place where I might, without the faintest suspicion of insincerity, join with others in simply seeking His presence. To sit down in silence could at least pledge me to nothing; it might open to me (as it did that morning) the very gate of heaven.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, as the French Dominican theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet calls to our attention, the Christian community is forever faced with the polar dynamics of Presence/Absence. He writes:

The assembly of Christians gathered in the name of Christ or in his memory is...the first sacramental representation of his presence. At the same time, it is the first stumbling block for faith, for such a representation is also the radical mark of his absence. It is not at all self-evident that it is he, the living Lord, who presides over the assembly...such an affirmation is positively scandalous.<sup>3</sup>

The Christian community gathers in the name of the One who is ostensibly not there. The One whom we invite, the One whom we celebrate, the One whom we worship is nowhere to be seen. Silence may lead nowhere else than to the terrifying realization that there is no thing there; silence may simply be our awkward assertion that God does not exist.<sup>4</sup>

Human beings stand always at the frontier of Mystery. Both elements of that Mystery, Presence and Absence, are managed in the community gathered for worship. It can be no other way without chaos or despair.

In this essay I will explore the question of the communal management of Presence and Absence and ask how the practice of silence functions liturgically to address the polar realities of God in and not in the community gathered for worship. Since I am asking questions regarding silence and liturgy, my intention is to be ecumenical, exploring Quaker and the wider Christian tradition particularly

informed by the concerns of liturgical theology—particularly the assertions that *lex orandi est lex credendi* (the rule of prayer is the rule of belief), and that the community gathered in worship is doing *theologia prima* (theological reflection and doctrinal development are *theologia secunda*).

Silence is present in the discussions and the practices of a number of Christian groups. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Vatican II's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, proclaims the importance of observing a reverent silence (30) and the General Instruction on the Roman Missal calls for silence at key moments in the ritual: during the penitential act, before the Collect, after Eucharist. Silence in the liturgy is included in the United Methodist Church's *Book of Worship*. The *Book of Common Prayer* (1977) utilizes silence particularly in the context of penitence during Eucharist and Ash Wednesday liturgies and also as dramatic and reflective punctuation between the Solemn Collects for Good Friday. The American Baptist celebrant declares before leading the "Our Father" and breaking the bread of communion: "Let us in silence offer our prayer for Christ's presence within and among us."<sup>5</sup>

Silence is, therefore, less a possession of any one tradition as it is a manifestation of faith, a response of faith which finds expression in the liturgically arranged rhythm of Christian worship.

## SILENCE AS RITUAL MANAGEMENT

### A. *Management of Presence*

We might ask as a point of entry into these matters—what is liturgy's role in worship, what does it mean, and why should Quakers care?

Etymologically, liturgy—*leitourgia*—refers to the "work of the people." Often this "work" is associated with the customary forms of the practices surrounding elements of Christian devotional life—baptism, Eucharist, prayer, confessions, burial of the dead, and so on—that is, with rituals, rites (*rituális* from *ritus*). Such an association is not altogether incorrect. Certainly, the work of the gathered community involves the careful and reverent handling of "customary things," those gifts that have been given to the present generation by the Church's faithful of previous generations.

Even the unprogrammed Friends meeting for worship has a ritual quality to it, that much is clear. The elements of the rite may not include Eucharist, prayers of confession, or benediction, but the gathering together, the centering, the silence, the handshake, are all “customary forms” which amount to a reasonably structured environment creating space for the visitation of Presence and for the communal management of Absence.

Geoffrey Wainwright has noted that ritual is simply the regular pattern of behavior which is invested with symbolic significance and efficacy. Thus, “... even those communities which pride themselves on their freedom from ‘ritual’ will generally be found to use ritual; only they will not be aware of it, and so will be unable either to enjoy its pleasures to the full or be properly vigilant about its dangers.”<sup>6</sup>

Among some Quakers there has been a propensity toward liturgical restrictivism. Less tolerance is afforded to liturgical expression within specifically Christian forms than is given to other-than Christian forms (Zen and Wicca, for example). Not only is this posture unappreciative of history, but it is disintegrated from the very tradition that can give cohesiveness to a community seeking the Presence of God. Certainly, there are many examples of romantic repriming to the neglect of seeing the “behold I am doing a new thing.” Yet, it is no solution to disconnect oneself in the process from the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of Sarah, Rachel, and Rebecca.” Such restrictivism exposes what can be interpreted as hostility toward the broader Christian tradition and it has proven to be painfully divisive within the Religious Society of Friends in our time.

A recent example is the hullabaloo resulting from a 1993 *Friends Journal* article titled: “A Quaker Baptism.” The author spoke openly of altering an Episcopal baptismal liturgy to conform to his own theology. He removed most of the queries to the baptismal candidate and his/her sponsors (save those regarding social responsibility) including the parental promise to rear the baptized as a Christian, the faith tradition of the ritual washing to which he offered his daughter. The first run of letters to the editor focused upon the washing itself and criticized the participation of a Quaker in this ritual act. Curiously, nothing was said about the theological mutilation that stripped baptism of its significance as a ritual act within the Christian faith. Not one word was offered concerning the traditional initiatory pattern of Baptism/Confirmation/Eucharist, or that baptism is, even from a history of religions perspective, initiation—a ritual act initiat-

ing the water-washed one into a particular community with a particular identity.<sup>7</sup>

Through the liturgy the community's story is reenacted, retold, re-presented. The rhythmic pattern of the Christian liturgical year takes the worshiper on a very somatically/sensual walk along a well-traveled path which is adorned with scenic portraits from the Christian story. This journey begins again at the same point it began the year before—full of the hope, love, joy, and peace of Advent's glad cycle of anticipation. Unlike the notion of cyclical time, evident in some ancient traditions, the Christian conception of sacred time follows a spiral pattern; Christian sacred time does not require the performance of the rite for the actual event to occur or for the *illud tempus* (time of origin) to be reactualized.<sup>8</sup> Rather, the spiral progresses along a linear path moving ever closer toward the *telos* of the community's eschatological hope. Time and nature are not what is regenerated in the ritual cycles of liturgy—we are. Thus, the liturgy may, at its best, function as a regenerative event whereby the “little stories” of our lives are drawn together into the “bigger story” of God's activity in the world through Jesus Christ and thus we are made new people, members together of the household of God. Without this merging of stories we are disconnected from the source of our spiritual birth and we wander aimlessly as people without a home. We may be seekers, but we are not homeless.

Through the liturgical drama, the participants are taken into the story. There they not only re-present it, but their identity is shaped by it, and their lives (history, present, and future) are read into the story, which is now claimed as their own. To a significant degree, the community's remembering of its own story depends upon (perhaps even, is contingent upon) the liturgical—the people at work—reenactment of it.<sup>9</sup> An acknowledgment of the didactic function of liturgy is expressed in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*: “Although the sacred liturgy is above all things the worship of the divine Majesty, it likewise contains abundant instruction for the faithful (33).”

However, the liturgy is not only reenactment or catechesis, it is a ritual that speaks in a managed way to the ambiguities as well as to the certainties of human existence. An explosion of divine power (*mana*) into the community is not the norm, nor could it, I suspect, even be endured—“No one can see God and live.” With our talk of mystical experience we may forget that unitive and communicative encounters with God are those *heirophanies* (Eliade), those instances

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of an overplus of consciousness (modified Otto), when the Sacred is clearly and convincingly manifest to us—for those moments we ought to be grateful. However, encounters of the intensity as portrayed in Bernini's sculpture, "The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa," simply do not characterize the daily life of the faithful. Liturgy is more realistic. Like life itself, liturgy is rhythmic, seasonal, and it is cognizant of the problem and reality of liminality.

The liturgy functions as a hermeneutic of sorts that, through its *ordo*, helps to make sense of numinous experiences. Instead of being reduced to dust by seeing the face of God, the liturgy opens the space for the worshiper to glimpse the passing shadow of the One who will be *who* he will be. Yet, the liturgy—the work of the people—also addresses those vacuous occasions when there are no apparent traces of the One who will be *where* she will be.

Rudolf Otto accentuates this vacuousness and at the same time deals a severe blow to the notion of Omnipresence by declaring it to be a

...frigid invention of metaphysical speculation, entirely without religious import. Scripture knows nothing of it. Scripture knows no "Omnipresence," neither the expression nor the meaning it expresses; it knows only the God who is where He wills to be, and is not where He wills not to be, the *deus mobilis*, who is no mere universally extended being, but an august mystery, that comes and goes, approaches and withdraws, has its time and hour, and may be far or near in infinite degrees, "closer than breathing" to us or miles remote from us.<sup>10</sup>

This subtracts nothing, in my estimation, from Karl Rahner's idea of the supernatural existential—that is, the posited affirmation that the entire world is graced—yet it returns to God God's Godness and it retains the Mystery and the Grace-full surprise of divine visitation. Otto continues: "... God indeed comes where and when He chooses, yet He will choose to come when we sincerely call upon Him and prepare ourselves truly for His visitation."<sup>11</sup> Thus, when a gathered people pray a prayer of invocation they are quite serious. It is not magic nor is it an attempt to domesticate God; it is not a "cold, meaningless ritual." Rather, it is a humble and unpretentious imploring for Presence; it is a preparation for visitation, a making of straight path-

ways in the wilderness of our lives for the advent of the Lord. From the *Book of Common Prayer* (1977) the people pray before Eucharist:

Be present, be present, O Jesus our Great High Priest, as you were present with your disciples and be known to us in the breaking of bread...(66).

And, in order to be reassured of Presence:

O God of Peace, who hast taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and in confidence shall be our strength: By the might of Thy Spirit lift us, we pray Thee, to Thy presence, where we may be still and know that Thou art God: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (59).

This is communal management. I do not use the word *management* here in a pejorative way such as to imply the manipulation of people or the regulation of God. I agree with Chauvet that, “The Spirit is God as *ungraspable*, always-surprising, always-elusive; it is the God who cannot be managed, continually spilling over every religious institution....”<sup>12</sup> I mean simply this: It is management because the community gathered creates the space (or, perhaps, unclutters the space) for Presence in a reasonably structured environment wherein the unmanageable Presence of God is invited and named. This is an intentional and deliberate ordering. An unprogrammed Friends meeting for worship may look much different from the Byzantine Rite, but it is just as much a communal management of Presence.

### *B. Management of Absence*

I have suggested that silence may function as ritual management of Absence as well as of Presence. This is really no more difficult to observe than is that of Presence. Here much more nuancing is necessary than time and space permit. However, the Absence of God, which is affirmed and managed in silence, is finally a dimension of God’s Presence. (This is why, in my estimation, apophatic mysticism must be dialogically wed to the kataphatic impulse and vice versa.) The two revolve in a dynamic and living expression of divinity each one expressive of the character of God who cannot be contained or managed.

Rudolf Otto’s classic phrase captures this duality (not dualism) quite well: *mysterium tremendum et facinans*. There is at once a fascinating, inviting, and luring element to Mystery which beckons us to

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“taste and see” (Ps. 34:8), and there is the terrifying, frightening, and dreadful element which brings us low and which causes us to utter: “Woe is me, for I am an unclean person of unclean lips” (Is. 6:5) and “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinner” (Lk 5:8). It is Isaiah’s vision of Yahweh (Is 6); it is Arjuna’s vision of Krishna (*Bhagavad Gita* XI). Terrifying and fascinating...this duality can be neglected when silence is spoken of in the beautiful but romantic words of Emerson: “Let us be silent that we may hear the whispers of God.”

This Absence may be *Deus incomprehensibilis* (i.e., the *incomprehensibilitas Dei*). *Ein begriffener Gott ist kein Gott* (Eckhart, “an apprehended God is no God”; this declaration is not unlike Anselm’s “God is that above which nothing greater can be thought of or conceived”). Such an affirmation is seen in Paul Tillich who spoke of the “God above the God of theism,” and Gordon Kaufman who distinguishes between the “Real God” (who/which is an utterly unknowable X) and the “Available God” (which is essentially a mental or imaginative construction). Even Karl Barth, always an advocate for “the Word,” concluded: “... we ought to speak of God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God. We ought therefore to recognize both our obligation and our inability and by that very recognition give God the glory.”<sup>13</sup>

As such, silence in the context of worship is a natural response to the limitations of human language and the limitations of human conceptual (even non-thematic) ability. Silence may be *Gloria Patri* and *Doxology*, *Sanctus* and *Te Deum Laudamus* sung loudly by hearts whose lips know their shortcomings.

Kieran Flanagan, in his book, *Sociology and Liturgy: Re-presentations of the Holy*, discusses the matter of silence as real absence in sacred rite. He explores the obvious apophatic dimension silence embodies. Flanagan sees silence in the context of worship, among other things, as the space into which sound is absorbed (as did Otto) and, when utilized appropriately, silence can be a means of transcending the boundaries of form and the constraints of language. It may serve, to use Gordon Lathrop’s language, as the breaking open of ritual.<sup>14</sup> When there is proper management of the social conditions in which silence emerges then it facilitates access to something greater than the purely communal—it bears witness to the limits of social form (i.e., the limits of communal structure) and in so doing it accentuates the content contained within the social form itself by bracketing it or framing it; but silence also bears witness to the content that

lies beyond form. One might suggest that this proper management is what permits the visitation of Grace which transforms a meeting of people gathered into a Gathered Meeting. “Silence provides a gratuitous gift of grace which redeems the failures and the limits of social form.”<sup>15</sup> This is an important point for Flanagan. Liturgy is clearly about the social, the communal; yet, he understands it to go far beyond the social alone. Liturgy functions as a routine for coping with the limits of the social, the community. When it can do this then the possibility for encounter with Presence is opened.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, silence is teeming with ambiguity. This one quality—ambiguity, along with its companion paradox—is precisely the essence of liturgy. Unambiguous, direct communication is more characteristic of ceremony.<sup>17</sup> The ambiguousness of silence is enough to suggest a potential liturgical function. When this ambiguity is permitted to stand then we affirm a bounteous vision of God and humanity. When this ambiguity is circumvented or denied then the vision of God and humanity that is affirmed is truncated and dishonest.

Silence, says Flanagan, cannot secure virtue on its own because it too easily leads to misunderstanding; it expresses antinomial qualities about the Self. In short, “...silence possesses profoundly dangerous qualities that are all too easy to underestimate.”<sup>18</sup> Silence may suggest an emptiness in which the worshiper finds that he or she is met by nothing but a feeling of abandonment, void, and Absence.

Silence may suggest repression or the lack of courage to speak in the face of injustice and suffering; it may represent an incapacity for community, a lack of charity, voicelessness, or disempowerment. In contrast with the ideals of community, it can also exemplify an unwillingness to participate, a disengagement from the other.<sup>19</sup>

Silence in the liturgy may signify the spiritual barrenness of contemporary society which, according to Dupré, is a kind of wasteland barren of a sense of God.<sup>20</sup> The psalmist at one point indicates that silence is a separation from God: “The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any that go down into silence” (Ps. 115:17). Silence is rather like calling out for someone while standing in a darkened room hearing nothing but the sound of our own voice. Max Picard writes that “...in the human mind silence is merely knowledge of the *Deus absconditus*, the hidden God.”<sup>21</sup> In the silence we open ourselves to the worst of all our fears: that there really is no God and that prayer is no more than *omphalopsychoi*. How the worshiping community

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responds in such moments of Absence, void, and abandonment—whether nihilistically or hopefully—speaks volumes regarding the character of our tradition.

Emptiness and Absence cannot be endured indefinitely. Even within the unprogrammed Quaker tradition, a meeting that has fallen completely silent, says Douglas Steere, will “... almost inevitably wither away.”<sup>22</sup> Purgative stages in the mystical life finally give way to illuminative and unitive ones; silence is the ground from which our words emerge.

## CONCLUSION

What then may we conclude from this discussion?

First, silence’s ambiguity speaks to the polar dimensions of the Presence and Absence of God in the context of corporate worship. God is both *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus* and silence has a singular genius for re-presenting this.

Second, liturgy itself is concerned with ambiguity and paradox. It speaks ambiguously and paradoxically of God *and* humanity—as such, the liturgy speaks truth simply.<sup>23</sup> As *leitourgia* liturgy is a human activity; as *leitourgia* liturgy is a communal activity; as *leitourgia* liturgy is work; or, as Chauvet writes: “Liturgical rituality is thus the symbolic expression of the human in its total corporality and as a being of desire.”<sup>24</sup> It is human work and yet it is work which intends God. It is management because the community gathered creates the space (or, perhaps, unclutters the space) for Presence in a reasonably structured environment wherein the unmanageable Presence of God is invited and named. This is an intentional and deliberate ordering. Although it may be ritual management the One-Who-Comes to us, the *Deus mobilis*, is free and dynamic, unable to be either contained or managed.

So then, silence and liturgy are not the strangers they are sometimes thought to be. It is important to remember that even with the intentionality inherent in ritual management, liturgical silence cannot finally be manufactured. Space may be provided. Hearts may long. Yet, even in our quietness silence may not come. It remains gift, and thus, grace. Both the Presence of God and the numinous silence come and go, at once visiting and again ostensibly Absent. And when it does come it brings with it a holy message: it proclaims that all that

is seen and all that is heard and all that is spoken is not all that there is. The worshipping community may transcend the limitations of form in its encounter with the living God who certainly visits but who also certainly surpasses the boundaries of even the communally managed environment. Like Advent, Lent, and Holy Week, silence orients the community gathered toward an eschatological vision that anticipates with hope what is yet to be.<sup>25</sup>

## NOTES

1. Hugh Barbour, *The Quakers in Puritan England*, foreword by Roland H. Bainton (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964). See chapter four.
2. Caroline Stephen, *Quaker Strongholds*, (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1890), p. 4.
3. Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan, S.J., and Madeleine Beaumont, (Collegeville: Pueblo Book, 1995), p. 187.
4. For Ignatius of Antioch, God's essential character is silence (*Sige*) and he suggests that God broke this silence only at the incarnation (*Letter to the Magnesians*, 8:2); the breaking of this silence was with such modesty and reserve that it was overlooked by the Prince of Evil (*Letter to the Ephesians*, 19).
5. John E. Skoglund and Nancy E. Hall, *A Manual of Worship*, new edition (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1993), p. 14.
6. Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: the Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 8.
7. Steven Zunes, "A Quaker Baptism," *Friends Journal* 39 (October 1993): 12. For responses to this article see the Forum section of *Friends Journal*, January and May 1994.
8. For a classic treatment of sacred time see Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1959), especially chapter two.
9. In another context I raise the question whether it is possible for the Religious Society of Friends to adequately address the matter of the entire Christian story in the absence of the liturgical cycles of retelling. See my review of John D. Copenhaver, Jr., "Prayerful Responsibility: The Relation of Prayer and Social Responsibility in the Religious Thought of Douglas Steere" (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992) in *Quaker Religious Thought* 26 (November 1993): 60-63.
10. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 2nd ed., trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 214.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Chauvet, *op. cit.*, p. 513. The emphasis is in the original.

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13. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), p. 190; Gordon Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 86; Karl Barth quoted in Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 300.
14. Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 27-31, 80-81, 139, 154, 157, 196, 199-201.
15. Kieran Flanagan, *Sociology and Liturgy: Re-presentations of the Holy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 250.
16. Kieran Flanagan, "Liturgy, Ambiguity and Silence: the Ritual Management of Real Absence," *The British Journal of Sociology* 36 (June 1985), 195.
17. Ronald Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982), pp. 41-45.
18. Flanagan, *Sociology and Liturgy*, p. 251.
19. *New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, s.v., "Silence," Bob Hurd.
20. Louis Dupré, "Spiritual Life in a Secular Age," in Mary Douglas and Steven Tipton, eds., *Religion in America: Spiritual Life in a Secular Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), p. 10.
21. Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, trans. Stanley Godman (South Bend, IN: Regnery/Gateway, Inc., 1952), p. 29.
22. Douglas V. Steere, "On Speaking Out of the Silence: Vocal Ministry in the Unprogrammed Meeting for Worship," Pendle Hill Pamphlet #182 (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1972), p. 7.
23. See Lathrop, *Holy Things*, pp. 97-104.
24. Chauvet, *op cit.*, p. 371.
25. On the eschatological character of silence see Flanagan, *Sociology and Liturgy*, pp. 253-254, and of worship see Don E. Saliers, *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), pp. 49-68.