

Silence, Metaphor and the Communication of Religious Meaning

Part II

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It would be fascinating to trace out in more detail the role of silence in modern thought. However, my aim here is necessarily limited to a selection of comments on silence rather than a comprehensive analysis of how this far from straightforward topic has been tackled.

Shooting Round Corners

There are, of course, *varieties* of silence. In an interesting paper in which he looks at silence in the work of Rudolf Otto and Harold Pinter, Bernard Dauenhauer notes that silence “does not always manifest itself as ‘safe’ and ‘benign’.”²⁸ It can, for example, be terrifying, menacing or awesome. Silence can express many states of mind, both trivial and profound and in spiritual training a distinction is often made between the silence of mouth, mind and will. And Arthur Danto, in an essay on “Silence and the Tao” makes a distinction between reaching and being reduced to silence.”²⁹ *One* way of looking at silence, though naturally it is not applicable to every manifestation of this phenomenon, is to view it as *what happens when metaphor fails*.

If the methodology of Religious Studies is empathetic, is such empathy not likely to lead towards a situation where silence rather than words is what is encountered? And if this is indeed the case, how, if at all, can the discipline function in a situation where, apparently, metaphor cannot operate? Before attempting an answer, I think we need briefly to review something of the conceptual centrality which metaphor has claim to.

Metaphor relies on our ability to establish degrees of comparison, so that we will be able to say of any phenomenon that it is like other phenomena in such and such a way. It is therefore fundamentally dependent on likeness. As J L Austin has remarked, “like” is a word which enables us “to shoot round corners.”³⁰ Its operation thus helps to ensure that we will never be left entirely speechless when we are faced with experiences which we have not had before and which do not fall

within our already established linguistic repertoire. Metaphor is perhaps the major factor contributing to the enormous flexibility and reach of the net of language, with which we can trawl through all sorts of different situations and only very rarely be absolutely lost for words.

There is a broad measure of agreement among philosophers, theologians and linguists, about the key role which metaphor plays in language. Ernest Cassirer, for example, sees language as “by its very nature and essence, metaphorical.”³¹ Frederic Ferre identifies metaphor as “the root figure of speech”,³² whilst in similar terms Suzanne Langer presents metaphor as the law of growth of every semantic.³³ Similarly, Sallie McFague suggests that all language is “ultimately traceable to metaphor”,³⁴ which must therefore be seen as “the foundation of language and thus of thought.”³⁵ Giving metaphor a similarly vital role, Max Muller, the so called “father of comparative religion” (a title which sometimes obscures his pioneering achievements in the study of language) held that “it is impossible in human language to express abstract ideas *except* by metaphor”.³⁶

Given the conceptual and expressive importance of metaphor, it should come as no surprise that it is heavily relied on both in religion and in the study of religion, as it is across all other areas of our expressive existence. In Hinduism, for example, Svetaketu is instructed about the central Upanishadic thesis concerning the unity of Atman and Brahman largely through the medium of various enlightening metaphors, chosen by his father Uddalaka; in Buddhism, the extreme foolishness of asking metaphysical questions, instead of getting on with the business of freeing oneself from dukkha and achieving nirvana, is vividly stated by metaphor in the strikingly powerful story of the man injured by a poisoned arrow. In the Old Testament, God is often portrayed as a shepherd, whilst in the New Testament, Jesus taught a significant part of his Good News via parable, which, as Sallie McFague points out, is extended metaphor.³⁷ This is to pick out some examples more or less at random and to say nothing about the relative incidence of metaphor in the different faiths.

Likewise in the study of religion, metaphor plays a key role. For instance, at the start of his encyclopedic study of *The Philosophies of India*, we find Heinrich Zimmer arguing that:

The gist of Buddhism can be grasped more readily and adequately by fathoming the main metaphors through which it appeals to our intuition than by a systematic study of the complicated superstructure, and the fine details of the developed teaching.³⁸

Philosophers of religion have long recognized the importance of

metaphor. As Thomas McPherson put it, summarizing a widely held opinion among his colleagues:

The view that in general when we talk about God we talk metaphorically is . . . that most usually subscribed to.³⁹

And it is significant that one of the most influential modern essays in this area, John Wisdom's famous work simply entitled "Gods", is profoundly metaphorical in nature.⁴⁰

Metaphor, as Max Black emphasized, is *not* some kind of "ornamental substitute for plain thought"⁴¹ but "a distinctive mode of achieving insight"⁴² in its own right.

That metaphor, far from being the decorative digression which it is sometimes misrepresented as, is a fundamental conceptual tool, is something stressed by Lakoff and Johnson in their study of *Metaphors we Live By*. "Metaphor", they tell us, "is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action"⁴³—for which reason many people see metaphor as something dispensable which they could get along without. Against this popular view, Lakoff and Johnson argue that

Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.⁴⁴

In fact when it comes to dealing with religion, it may appear as if metaphor is the *only* procedure which can be followed. Thus Sallie McFague argues that:

Either we accept the necessity of metaphorical language for what might be called "the mysteries of life", or we sink into silence, or speaking in tongues, or a kind of literal mindedness which is difficult for the contemporary, educated person to defend.⁴⁵

The problem is that in key areas of "the mysteries of life" silence seems to have got there before us, so to speak, whipping away the rug of metaphorical possibility from under the feet of our expressive repertoire. Can Religious Studies proceed in such a situation? Is it possible to study those areas of religion where silence seems to deny any foothold to a traditional metaphorical approach?

George Steiner has bemoaned the fact that although we have

histories of massacre, deception and other less admirable human achievements, we have none of metaphor. Yet when, for example, someone saw autumn in a person's face for the first time we surely have a veritable revolution in the way in which the world was conceived. "Such figures", Steiner writes, "are new mappings of the world, they reorganize our habitation of reality."⁴⁶ Following much the same line of thought as Steiner, Earl R MacCormac suggests that metaphors generate expressions which "disturb the status quo of ordinary language"⁴⁷ What happens, though, when no matter how much it is disturbed, the status quo of ordinary expression simply fails to grasp something?

The natural philosopher and mystic John Stewart Collis, writing in his book, *The Vision of Glory*, says at one point:

It is astonishing to discover that this stone which I hold in my hand is not a solid but a conglomeration of cages, each with a tiger inside. I put it that way because I see it that way, and I need strong words, though these words are too weak and none could be obedient enough to do justice to the full truth.⁴⁸

The religious consciousness, I would argue, is centrally concerned with a "vision of glory", for which strong words are needed but, in the end, all are too weak to do justice to what that consciousness claims to have seen. This is very much the point made by Ian Ramsey with his concept of "qualifiers". According to Ramsey, religious language is dotted with qualifiers—words like "infinite", "perfect", "eternal", "ineffable" and so on, which act to "multiply models without end",⁴⁹ denying that any of them can fully grasp what is being encountered. Can Religious Studies proceed when comparison cannot get a grip and when, as a result, metaphor fails?

Many examples of such radical failure could be listed, backing up the point made by Meister Eckhart that "All words fail" when it comes to speaking about God. "We can say nothing of God", says Eckhart, "because nothing is like him."⁵⁰ His point is echoed in a thoroughgoing denial of language's ability to cast its metaphorical net into the religious deep, which is given by the great Hindu philosopher Shankara:

There is no class of substance to which the Brahman belongs, no common genus. It cannot therefore be denoted by words which like "being" in the ordinary sense signify a category of things. Nor can it be denoted by quality for it is without qualities; nor yet by activity, because it is without activity.. neither can it be denoted by relationship for it is without a second. Therefore it cannot be defined by word or idea, as the scripture says, it is the one before whom words recoil.⁵¹

If silence is fundamental to religion, and if its cause is something “before which words recoil”, how can the study of religion proceed?

A further indication of the religious centrality of silence may be seen in a story told about the semi-fictional early pilgrim monk Tripitaka, who travelled to India from China in search of Buddhist scriptures. After all sorts of adventures he finally locates the texts he is looking for. However, after leaving the monastery which provided them he thought it would be prudent to check that he had been given the right thing before embarking on his long journey home. Unrolling the scrolls he found that they were totally blank. He returned to the monastery and pointed this out to the abbot, who rather crossly told him that these were the real scriptures, but if he and his people were too stupid to appreciate them then they had better settle for an inferior set which were covered in writing. The historicity of the story is irrelevant; it serves to re-emphasise the extent to which religion is “the communication of silence without breaking the silence”. Is the study of religion inevitably geared to looking at “inferior” printed versions?.

The Arts and Religious Studies

One of the characters in Brian Friel’s play *Translations* makes the following observation:

It can happen that a civilization can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of fact.²

Friel’s play examines some aspects of the struggle for linguistic dominance between English and Irish in nineteenth century rural Ireland and of course one might wish to dispute the accuracy of his comment. Moreover, the image of language as a contour map, a network of intricate lines capable of expressing every nuance of undulation in an underlying landscape of reality is rather simplistic and might restrict us to the kind of one-for-one equivalence of the expressive cry, or to what Rudolf Otto termed “original numinous sounds”³ I do not want to explore such matters here, but simply to recast Friel’s warning into a question and apply it to Religious Studies:

Could it happen that the discipline might become imprisoned in a media contour which does not match the religious landscape which it seeks to explore?

According to Pierre Babin, the American couch-potato has become imprisoned in a media contour which does not match the landscape of God; the hyperauditory Indian, on the other hand, has his ear far closer

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to the transcendent ground, largely because of his much greater sensitivity to silence. For Babin, though, the ideal lies somewhere in between, listening attuned to both the rational and non-rational elements which Otto identified. "There are in us seeds of knowledge, as of fire in a flint", said Descartes, "philosophers extract them by way of reason, but poets strike them out by way of imagination, and they shine more bright."⁵⁴ Religious Studies needs reason *and* imagination if its endeavours are to be appropriately tuned to the material which it seeks to understand. It is surely unnecessarily limiting to suppose that its area of operation is constrained by exclusively alphabetical, verbal media.

In an essay in *Turning Points in Religious Studies*, John Hinnells provides some interesting arguments for a media revolution in the study of religion which might help to redress the balance between reason and imagination. Hinnells takes the view that

If the arts are commonly what makes a religion live for its adherents, then they should be at the centre of Religious Studies.⁵⁵

Hinnells points out that "over the millenia the great majority of the world's religious people have been illiterate", that "mass literacy is a relatively modern and still mainly a Western phenomenon."⁵⁶ "Only a hundred years ago," he reminds us, "literacy was not common in much of the known world."⁵⁷

Appropriately enough, though he makes no mention of the fact, Hinnells was writing in what was designated "International Literacy Year, and estimates of illiteracy from UNESCO for 1990 suggest that there are some 880 million adults in the world today who cannot read or write. Given the limited extent of literacy, Hinnells argues that if the study of religion focuses exclusively on textual sources, "it is 'plugging in' to a level of religion most of its practitioners are not, or have not been, engaged in."⁵⁸ The arts, he says, represent "a major form of religious expression."⁵⁹ From the cave paintings of paleolithic times to the works of twentieth century artists like Mark Rothko, the religious perceptions of humankind find lucid expression in non-verbal form. For many people, religious meaning is mediated primarily by images rather than by words. And the substance of that meaning cannot be exhausted by translation into verbal form.

Three arguments can be used to strengthen Hinnells' point. *First*: if silence characterizes a, or the, primary locus of religious meaning, the arts may be a more appropriate way of stating and exploring this than any traditional textual resource, so if we are interested in understanding the meaning of religious silence our studies should be geared

accordingly; *Second*: if Pierre Babin is right about our society suffering from a pollution of information which makes it virtually impossible to take on anything new,⁶⁰ then perhaps the visual, rather than the verbal will find a way through this blockage; *Thirdly*, since art itself is taking on something of the aura of the sacred in modern times it seems a particularly suitable mode (or choice) of focus for Religious Studies to take. Hinnells' thesis receives strong support, incidentally, from the art historian Gregor Goethals' *The Electronic Golden Calf*. Goethals argues that media revolutions spark revolutions in the way in which religions are expressed and understood and that images have an autonomy of meaning which cannot be dealt with in words.⁶¹

As long ago as 1964, Marshall McLuhan suggested that "the educational establishment, founded on print, does not yet admit of any other responsibilities."⁶² It is perhaps time that Religious Studies looked up from the printed page that all too often preoccupy them and gave other forms of expression the attention which their significance warrants. Hinnells' arguments, like those of Babin and Otto, seem to point to some sort of balance which can only be achieved if we correct the print-bias that currently dominates the discipline. Such a correction would be particularly timely in the current media-climate. After all, as Harvey Cox has pointed out, most of those now engaged in Religious Studies "live and work on tiny rafts of words adrift in an ocean of images."⁶³

If we are dealing with a subject at whose heart lies an impenetrable silence, a silence which seems to be replete with meaning and significance, then the means of exploration which we customarily use: lectures, seminars, articles, books etc . may need to be supplemented with other media. Perhaps a lead in the kind of direction we may need to go in here, is suggested by the style and format of the anthropologist Edmund Carpenter's book about *Eskimo Realities*, where not only are non-print media a major focus of interest but where his account abandons the close-set type of the academic monograph and instead uses a minimalist text on near empty pages to try to convey directly the importance of silence and empty space; the medium itself becomes a metaphor for the material under study.⁶⁴

Avoiding a Sixth Finger Exercise

In his study, Carpenter illustrates how-a media revolution may lead to a conceptual revolution. Originally, Eskimo societies were, as he puts it, "implosive: everybody was involved with everybody, simultaneously and instantaneously, in a seamless web of human kinship and responsibility. There was no isolating individualism, no private

consciousness, no private point of view.”⁶⁵ Individualism, self-expression a private point of view—all this Carpenter attributes to “the fragmenting power of writing and print”⁶⁶ which came with the introduction of English.

We do not necessarily need a *new* medium to effect such radical change; it is interesting to speculate on the extent to which a new range of metaphorical reference might act to revolutionise our ways of seeing and understanding the world. For example, in his fascinating essay, “Novels Dictated by Crickets”, Primo Levi notes the tiredness of our usual bestiary of comparisons: “ferocious as a lion”, “cunning as a fox” and so on, and suggests that:

the discoveries of modern naturalists have opened for writers a vein of ideas whose exploitation is only at its timid beginnings⁶⁷

One wonders if the massively expanded range of religious reference afforded by the work of Religious Studies might unearth a new vein of expression yet to be mined. I suspect that some interesting parallels could be drawn here between what Karlheinz Stockhausen says in a brilliant essay on “World Music”, about the possibilities of new harmonic forms emerging in an era of global interconsciousness about the varieties of musical expression, and the current situation as regards our hugely encompassing religious vocabulary. However, this is something I only mention in passing.⁶⁸

In his critique of modern American society, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman writes:

Whether we are experiencing the world through the lens of speech or the printed word or the television camera, our media metaphors classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, colour it, argue a case for what the world is like.. our media are our metaphors. Our metaphors create the content of our culture.⁶⁹

If it remains imprisoned in the print-media which it customarily uses, Religious Studies risks sequencing, enlarging, reducing, understanding religion according to a conceptual model which may omit or ignore one of its most important aspects, namely silence.

It seems appropriate to end by stressing the way in which silence may sometimes be called for in dealing with religious material. In one of his travel diaries, Matsuo Basho, Japan’s great poet and master of haiku, a literary form replete with silence, describes visiting a sacred place on pilgrimage. It is a place about which much has been written, a source of inspiration for many poets. Basho, instead of adding to this outpouring

of words simply notes that to write another poem about this place would be like adding a sixth finger to a hand. Instead, he opts for silence.⁷⁰ Should the study of religion not likewise consider silence as an appropriate response, at least now and then? In a climate where academics are under as much pressure as DJs to sustain the momentum of their own utterances—though through publication rather than the *spoken* world—this might be a worrying conclusion to arrive at. But it is surely more important to let the nature of our subject matter, rather than the demands of a Research Assessment Exercise, dictate the course which our studies should follow. If, as John Bowker suggests in *The Religious Imagination and the Sense of God*, a book which deals sensitively and creatively with silence in four religious traditions, “the words of the New Testament have become so familiar that it is almost impossible any longer to hear them”,⁷¹ might it not, perhaps, be time to advocate silence and careful listening, rather than continued analysis and discussion? If a major locus of religious meaning lies out with the verbal, as John Hinnells and others suggest, might it not be time to advocate an approach which is not exclusively print-based? In short, if we take the importance of religious silence seriously, and I think there are good grounds for doing so, is this not likely to issue in a quiet revolution in the media used by Religious Studies to inquire into, and to report on, its area of concern?

- 28 Dauenhauer, *op. cit.*, p 19. Further ideas on the varieties of silence can be found in Deborah Tannen and Muriel Saville-Troike (eds.) *Perspectives on Silence*, New Jersey:1985.
- 29 Arthur C Danto, “Language and the Tao: Some Reflections on Ineffability”, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* Vol. 1 (1973), pp 45–55.
- 30 J L Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, Oxford:1962, p 74.
- 31 Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, New Haven:1944, p 109.
- 32 Frederick Ferre, “Metaphors, Models and Religion”, *Soundings*, Vol. 51 (1968), p 328.
- 33 Suzanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: 1942, p 147.
- 34 Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, London: 1975, p 50.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 F Max Muller, *Contributions to the Science of Mythology* London: 1897, Vol. 1 p 68f, as quoted by Cassirer, *op. cit.* p 109.
- 37 McFague, *op. cit.* p 2.
- 38 Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, New Jersey:1951, pp 474–5.
- 39 Thomas McPherson, *The Philosophy of Religion*, London: 1965, p 188.
- 40 John Wisdom, “Gods”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1944/5, p 185f.
- 41 Max Black, *Models and Metaphors*, New York:1962, p 237.
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 George Lakoff & Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago: 1980, p 3.
- 44 *Ibid.*
- 45 McFague, *op. cit.* p 28.

- 46 George Steiner, *After Babel*, London: 1975, p 23.
- 47 Earl R MacCormac, "Religious Metaphors: Mediators Between Biological and Cultural Evolution that Generate Transcendent Meaning", *Zygon*, Vol. 18 (1983), p 58.
- 48 John Stewart Collis, *The Vision of Glory. the Extraordinary Nature of the Ordinary*, London:1972, p 2.
- 49 I T Ramsey, *Models and Mystery*, London:1964, p 60.
- 50 Quoted in Winston L King, "Negation as a Religious Category", *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 37 (1957), p 107.
- 51 Quoted in Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* London:1946, p 32. The scripture to which Shankara refers is the Taittirya Upanishad, 1.2.
- 52 Brian Friel, *Translations*, London:1981, p 43.
- 53 See Otto, op. cit., Appendix III, pp 190–193 on "original Numinous Sounds".
- 54 Rene Descartes, *Private Thoughts*.
- 55 John R Hinnells, "Religion and the Arts", in Ursula King (ed.) *Turning Points in Religious Studies*, Edinburgh: 1990, P 270.
- 56 *Ibid.*, p 257.
- 57 *Ibid.*
- 58 *Ibid.*
- 59 *Ibid.*
- 60 Babin, op. cit., p 120.
- 61 Gregor Goethals, *The Electronic Golden Calf: Images. Religion and the Making of Meaning*, Massachusetts:1990.
- 62 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, London: 1964, p 305.
- 63 Harvey Cox, *The Seduction of the Spirit*, New York:1973, p 305.
- 64 Edmund Carpenter, *Eskimo Realities*, New York: 1973.
- 65 *Ibid.*, p 198.
- 66 *Ibid.* The profound affect of literacy on consciousness in general (and religiousness in particular), has been explored by Walter J. Ong (see, for example, his *Orality and Literacy. the Technologizing of the Word*, London: 1982), and Jack Goody (see his *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*, Cambridge:1986).
- 67 Primo Levi, *Other People's Trades*, tr. Raymond Leventhal, London: 1991, p 148.
- 68 Stockhausen's essay on "World Music", tr. Bernhard Radloff, appears in *The Dalhousie Review*, Vol. 69 no 3 (1989), pp 318–326. See my "Utility, Understanding and Creativity in the Study of Religion", *New Blackfriars*, [Vol. LXXIV] 1993 pp 1420, for some thoughts on how his ideas might be applied to Religious Studies.
- 69 Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, London: 1986, p.10 & p 15.
- 70 Matsuo Basho, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*, tr. Nobuyuki Yuasa, Hammondsorth:1966, p 138. Basho lived from 1644–1694.
- 71 John Bowker, *The Religious Imagination and the Sense of God*, Oxford: 1978, p 177.