Religious Silence: British Quakerism and British Buddhism Compared

Sandra Bell and Peter Collins
University of Durham

Abstract

In this paper we explore the communicative function of silence among British Quakers and British Theravāda Buddhists. Both examples link silence to stillness with the implication that non-activity is a means of evoking sacred presence. It is proposed that such an evocation is achieved through attaching aesthetic and ethical value to the performance of stillness and silence. Furthermore, we suggest that the identity of each of these religious communities is, in many respects, defined through the emphasis that is placed on the existential and moral significance of silence.

Keywords

Anthropology of communication; Anthropology of religion; Buddhism; Quakerism; Silence; Stillness.

Introduction

The literature on Quakerism is burgeoning. While historians have long shown great interest in early Quakerism, later periods are coming under increasing scrutiny; furthermore, those working within and across the disciplines of Religious Studies, Theology, Psychology, Sociology and Women's Studies are showing increasing interest in what is turning out to be a very fertile subject. Admittedly, anthropology has come onto the scene rather late but brings with it an enthusiasm for comparative analysis lacking in some other disciplines and it is this approach which we adopt in the present paper.

Although in recent years anthropologists and others have paid considerable attention to the ethnography of speaking (Hymes 1962, 1974; Bauman and Sherzer 1974; Tyler 1978; Saville-Troike 1982) relatively little attention has been paid to the intimately related topic of orchestrated silence.(1) Furthermore, anthropologists, whether dealing with the religious or the secular, have emphasised talk/noise to the exclusion of silence.(2) The neglect of silence is a serious omission in the anthropology of communication, for silence can be organised in meaningful ways, and combined into ritual form as readily as utterance or music or any form of intentional sound. In the two ethnographic examples considered here, British Theravāda Buddhism and British Quakerism, to ignore silence would be seriously to limit one's comprehension of them.

Sontag (1994) reminds us that silence is a singular cultural product, whilst Bruneau maintains that when measured against expression silence is 'bigger because it contains, encompasses and supports expressive action' (1982:7). Silence is thus more than the mere absence of sound or saying (Crumbine 1975; Jaworski 1993; Picard 1948:14). Rather, it is the ground of these things and a primary element in human thought processes and cultural development (Johannesen 1974). Silence is, indeed, 'a rich and complex phenomenon' (Dauenhauer 1980:3).

We propose that extended silences in the form of worship, prayer, meditation and contemplation feature as customary religious practices in so many different cultural contexts primarily because silence is experientially connected to the ineffable. More specifically, for members and attenders of the Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain and the British Theravāda Buddhists who feature in this paper, silence represents a state of receptivity to religious truths that lies beyond conditioned reality and is thus only partially accessible through words. In these contexts silence is valued because its nature implies that 'our words, the units of our naming and recognition in the world, presuppose a reality which is prior to our naming and doing' (Long 1969:148).

Bruneau argues that silence is actually the basis 'for metaphorical extension' through its association with temporal factors. He proposes that time, along with silence, is a 'concept and imposition' of the human mind and that 'mind time' does not necessarily correspond to the segmentation of mechanical, artificial time. Most

of us can identify what is being referred to here, through having experienced the same segment of artificial time in quite different ways. Contrast, for example a seemingly interminable four hour delay at the airport with an enjoyable party of the same duration. 'Mind time' can also be experienced as 'psycholinguistic slow time' which Bruneau particularly associates with silence. He claims that 'one's perceptual processing appears to be slowed and expanded as one slows or expands time by imposing silence' (Bruneau 1973:22). In this way a person imposes silence in order to dredge memory for associations which lead to the construction and use of metaphoric expression. He proposes that metaphoric movement is '*spatial* and organizational in mind.' (Ibid:23) It occurs as a 'process of *making* slow-time in order to move through levels of verbally associated, affective experience in memory.' (Ibid)

Among Buddhists and Quakers silence is closely associated with a state of repose, and together these two elements are believed to create the ideal conditions for spiritual attainment. This observable link between silence and stillness is reminiscent of the semiological theory of Fernando Poyatos. Poyatos' studies of sound and movement as elements of the 'basic triple structure' of communication - language, paralanguage and kinesics - led him to 'acknowledge more and more the ability of silence and stillness to perform structural and communicative functions, as well as their importance as sign-producing non-activities in social interaction' (Poyatos 1981:6). Poyatos argues that silence and stillness act as systems in their own right, 'subject even to the rules and coding mechanisms that govern speech and kinesics' (ibid:6). These are the systems that we will attempt to reveal through discrete case studies, beginning with the Quakers and moving on to the Buddhists. Finally, the ethnographic material, set in historical context, is considered with a view to discovering those contrasting and common elements which we suggest might be extended further towards comparisons with other groups or communities that emphasise the ritual value of silence.

The End of All Words: Quaker Worship

> Love silence, even in the mind...Much speaking, as much thinking, spends; and in many thoughts, as well as words, there is sin. True silence is the rest of the mind; and is to the spirit, what sleep is to the

body, nourishment and refreshment. (*Quaker Faith and Practice* 20.11. William Penn 1699)

Each Sunday of the year British Friends (Quakers), like their counterparts in other parts of the world, attend what is known as 'meeting for worship'. The event is generally characterised as 'silent', even though there are points in the meeting where it may be appropriate for individuals to bear witness through utterance. Such a speech act whereby individuals may punctuate the silence with an observation or insight is categorised as 'vocal ministry'. The term vocal ministry cannot be applied to ordinary conversational speech but must, by definition, be framed by the silence of the meeting from which it emerges and into which it is, on completion, resolved. The silence of the meeting is however, itself formalised and marked by a wider frame, represented by the noisy bustle of conversations, gossip and exchanges of pleasantries that occur at the beginning and end of each meeting.

Let us take as an ethnographic example a typical Sunday morning at the Quaker meeting house. Friends begin to congregate at around 10am in an area known as the concourse, a low, corridor-like space with cloakrooms at one end near the entrance and the meeting room at the other. The concourse is in fact a soundproofed area which ensures that social 'noise' is less likely to penetrate the meeting room. The groups who chatter prior to meeting for worship cluster around the entrance as far away as possible from the portal of the meeting room.

The meeting room represents and reconstitutes, architecturally, the silence and stillness of worship. Chairs are arranged in concentric circles around a table on which are placed a copy of *Quaker Faith and Practice*, a Bible and a vase of flowers. The room is otherwise empty of religious appurtenances - crosses, candles, paintings, lecterns, altars, fonts, stained glass and statues that mark religious space even within the Protestant Christian tradition. There is no means of making music, though on rare occasions Quakers stand and sing in meeting. The white walls are bare and the floor, in this case, is covered by blue carpet tiles, unlike the rest of the building, so even the sound of footsteps is muted. The circle of chairs represents the unity and absence of hierarchy within the worshipping group. This is the plainest of rooms in a plain building; a setting which, given the absence of ritual props, can be characterised as visually silent so, as one Friend explained, there is 'room for God'.

By 10.30am talk reaches a crescendo, as if to accentuate the impending silence (*cf.* Needham 1967). A signal from a vigilant Friend, most likely an elder, serves to usher participants towards the meeting room and talk begins to subside as people approach the room. Quaker etiquette deems worship to have begun when the first Friend enters. The turning away from talk is simultaneously a turning towards the Light. Instructions on how Friends should conduct themselves at the start of meeting for worship are contained in the text of *Quaker Faith and Practice* that lies on the table at centre of the meeting room. It is a collection of 'treasured writings' by Friends, updated and revised once every generation and functions as a canonical text. An entry by Alexander Parker, originating in 1660, bids worshippers to enter the meeting 'in the fear of the Lord, sit down in pure stillness and silence of all flesh, and wait in the light...Those who are brought to a pure still waiting upon God in the spirit, are come nearer to the Lord than words are...' (*Quaker Faith and Practice*, 2.41)

These ideas concerning the direct apprehension of God on the part of the worshipper were the source of persecution for the founders of Quakerism. Quakers continued to be considered a serious threat by both Church and State throughout the second half of the seventeenth century (Hill 1975, Reay 1980, 1985, 1986). George Fox and others developed a series of testimonies which stood in stark contrast to those characteristics of Anglicanism that they perceived to be typical (Ingle 1994, Thomas 1989). The testimonies to plainness, which resemble, in many respects, the moral injunctions accepted within the Theravādin Buddhist tradition treated below, relate to speech (Braithwaite 1912, Bauman 1974, 1981, 1983), dress (Braithwaite 1912, Kendall 1985), architecture and furnishings (Lidbetter 1961, Butler 1978, Southall n.d.), trade (Braithwaite 1912), liturgy (Bauman 1983), church organisation (Braithwaite 1912, 1919, Sheeran 1991) and manners (Braithwaite 1912). Together with the testimonies against tithes and involvement in the military, these 'performances of the plain' were understood by State and Church to represent a dangerous levelling tendency which was taken by Parliament and following the Restoration, the Monarchy to mean outright rebellion (Cole 1956, Hill 1975, Reay 1985). Early meeting houses were built in the vernacular and Quaker liturgy was simple in form from the outset.

Prior to the Toleration Act of 1689 meetings were frequently attacked, Friends beaten and buildings demolished. Yet Friends continued to meet in open defiance of both secular and Church authorities. The 'silent meeting' as it appears systematically recorded in surviving minute books from hundreds of meetings was the most obvious symbol of group identity and solidarity during this turbulent period. The silent meeting was the most powerful metaphorical expression of the Quakers' defiant but simple message - 'down with the Church!' (Moore 1992).(3)

Quaker worship was abhorrent to the authorities of Church and State because it exhibited a social levelling. During meeting women were as likely to speak as men and giving voice to women was perhaps the most heinous blasphemy of all (Braithwaite 1912, Thomas 1958, Trevett 1991). Fox explicitly denied the legitimacy of university-educated clerics to preach, attacking them repeatedly for speaking when unprompted by the Spirit (Nickalls 1952: 39). Worship was initiated by Friends themselves, not at the behest of a priest. Silent worship was, from the outset, a part of a genre driven by early Friends' determination to generate their own identity through playing the *vis-à-vis*, as Boon puts it (Boon 1982), with the Established Church. (4) But silence was more than merely an aspect of that genre, it was perhaps the pivotal metaphor around which other acts of plaining, or levelling, revolved. In the absence of iconic forms, the silent meeting was and still is perhaps the dominant symbol of Quakerism and its performance the dominant symbolic process.

Back in the meeting house children sit quietly with their parents, whose posture like their dress is unostentatious - no Sunday hats or frills. After the first quarter of an hour the children leave with volunteer 'teachers' for a smaller room and quiet descends once again on the worshippers. Silence may be sustained for the entire meeting, but it is more likely that one or more participants will stand and speak. Sometimes, a person giving vocal ministry will initiate a thread or theme that is subsequently developed by others. Vocal ministry and silence are often described in the canon as interwoven, the one evolving out of the other. Worshippers are taught to attend to the silence of others as closely as they might follow the words of individual speech acts. It is intended that each person actively participates in the silence of meeting in a collaborative act.

Silent worship and the spoken word are both parts of Quaker ministry. The ministry of silence demands the faithful activity of every member in the meeting (*Quaker Faith and Practice* 2.01. Revision Committee 1967, 1994).

The canon entreats ministers to speak from within their own experience and spoken ministry is usually auto/biographical. The silence frames these accounts, rather like the white margins frame the text of a poem, so that words spoken in meeting are divorced from ordinary speech and become themselves sacralised. To stand and speak in meeting was and is a powerful constative or performative act (Austin 1975, Searle 1969): it embodies the principle and primacy of spiritual equality. Vocal ministry rests on a paradox in that it seeks to bring others to silence, to the end of words, to the recognition that God is immanent within every individual (Bauman 1974).

Of course, the silence of meeting is itself partly framed by external noise from cars, passers-by, birdsong, the accidental jangling of coins in someone's pocket - and sometimes a participant will alight on sounds such as these as the starting point for vocal ministry. John Cage (1961) remarks that there is no such thing as *absolute* silence. One is bound, at least, to hear one's own heartbeat. Friends are well aware of this and may comment favourably on vocal ministry inspired by these infiltrations, pointing to the integration of meeting with the world outside, the fusing of sacred and profane. This idea represents a core value in Quakerism where all life is believed to be sacred. Its expression in worship ideally allows for even the grossest of interruptions to be regarded not as disruptive but capable of being enfolded within the corporate silence.(5)

There is always the potential for tension to arise because the ideal is one of freedom of speech. Unlike most forms of Christian worship which are conducted and orchestrated by a priest or minister, among Quakers no single person is vested with the authority to control or direct the congregation's relationship with the divine. Though the quietist ethos generally serves as a brake on enthusiasm, each participant at meeting is an acknowledged potential medium for the Word. Silence is perceived as a channel through which the divine Word can enter the hearts, minds and voices of members of the congregation. Who knows beforehand who might be

chosen to give voice to it? Or how it might be given expression? In this sense meeting for worship is a dangerous event, an occasion when 'anything might happen'. But just as there is potential for danger there is also potential for disappointment such as when an individual feels disengaged from the experience which the canon proclaims as intentionally engaging.

Meetings are public, social events and may be performed more or less satisfactorily. When Friends talk of their experience of meeting, which they rarely do unless directly asked, they voice a range of responses. For some it is the only 'piece of quiet' they have during the week; others say that it is a deeply spiritual experience. And participants 'do' many things during meeting. Some 'unwind', 'mull over' the events of the week or just 'sit quietly'. Others 'pray', 'meditate', 'wait on God', 'empty their mind' - expressions often glossed as 'centring down'. Still others make it abundantly clear that they drift in and out of meeting, struggling not to write shopping lists or work out problems that have arisen at work. Friends' opinions regarding the quality of any one meeting for worship need not coincide. A 'gathered meeting' may be defined as one in which a profound sense of the divine is felt, though what has been a 'gathered meeting' for one person might be an 'ordinary occasion' for another. Silence glosses these varieties of experience as united and unifying practice.(6)

There is often a strong feeling expressed that the quality of worship depends on a shared responsibility and that no one individual can be blamed when a meeting falls short of the ideal. Indeed, some might say that one's 'condition' prevented one from experiencing what others had experienced as the ideal. As Lewis points out (1980:8-9), this irresolution is no bad thing:

> Ritual is not exactly like language; it is not exactly like
> communication by means of a code nor can it be decoded like one.
> The complexity and uncertainty about a ritual's meaning is not to be
> seen just as a defect - a code too obscure, too hard to decipher, too
> easily garbled. It can also be a source of that strength, evocative
> power, resilience and mutability which may sometimes sustain and
> preserve ritual performance.

There is a more or less clear idea, then, of what constitutes a good performance when it comes to silent worship, despite the fact that specific performances may be judged differently by those present. The meeting, in so far as it can be characterised as a performance, is more like the improvisation of a jazz combo than a concert orchestra. It is as if participants have been issued with a blank score though the key and instrumentation is provided through past performances which live in the memories of those present and which are recorded in canonic texts, and in particular, *Quaker Faith and Practice*.(7)

Stilling the Mind: British Theravāda Buddhists

The central religious technique in Theravāda Buddhism is to sit still, silent and alert while attempting to quieten the clamour of the mind's thoughts and preoccupations. In Asia this technique is most commonly practised by an elite group of self-disciplined ascetic monks. They hold an elevated position in the spiritual hierarchy and their monasteries are located in remote and secluded forests (Tambiah 1984, Carrithers 1983). More recently in Asia lay people have taken up the practice of meditation in increasing numbers. They too represent an elite, though in this case a middle class elite whose membership is defined by prosperity and education (Ames 1963, Gombrich 1981, Kornfield 1977).

Among Theravāda Buddhist converts in Britain, the pursuit of meditation is normal practice. For many, their teachers and guides are senior Western monks of the British Forest Sangha (order) who are fully mendicant and receive material support from their British lay supporters. The British Sangha belong to an ascetic monastic lineage originating with the much venerated Thai meditation master, Ajahn Chah (Tambiah 1994:136-38), and this connection, together with their reputation for strict observation of the monastic discipline (Pali - *vinaya*), ensures that the four monasteries in Hertfordshire, Sussex, Devon and Northumberland also receive donations from the wealthy devotees in Thailand.

For Theravāda Buddhists in Asia and Britain the dominant and ubiquitous religious icon is the *buddha-rūpa* which, in Pali, sacred language of the Theravādins, means literally 'the form of the Buddha'. The sizes of the statues range from massive to small enough to wear around a devotee's neck. Reclining and standing Buddhas are not infrequent, but they are far less common than images where the Buddha is

seated. There are four traditional stereotypic poses in which the cross-legged, seated Buddha is portrayed wearing monastic robes. By far the most common of the four postures has the hands crossed in the lap in what is known as the *dhyāna mudra*, the 'seal of meditation' (Coomaraswamy 1974: 332-333). The Buddha's eyes are half closed and sketched on the serene features of his face is a faint and blissful smile. In Coomaraswamy's view the form of the seated and meditating Buddha has borrowed from an existing genre - the figure of the seated yogi whose still, silent, steadfast form is likened in Indian texts to 'the flame in a windless spot that does not flicker' (ibid: 331).

The still and silent Buddha exemplifies, in a single figure, both the practice and the goal of meditation by drawing on iconic, indexical and symbolic forms of signification. It is indexical as it accurately demonstrates the postures and expressions appropriate to meditation. And indeed, I have often heard the monks refer to the image when teaching people to meditate. It is an iconic representation of an actual person, Gotama the Buddha, now dead and gone beyond the reach of human beings. And it is as a symbol that the meditating Buddha, clad in his monk's robes, evokes the tripartite elements of Buddhism, known as the Triple Gem - the Buddha (personification of spiritual liberation), the *dhamma* (the Buddha's teaching of the path to spiritual liberation) and the *sangha* (the order of monks founded by the Buddha to conserve and disseminate *dhamma*). The plastic image of the meditating Buddha captures all of these things in a fluent rendering of stillness and silence and the ubiquity of this image is itself a pointer to the persuasive and powerful significance of these qualities, or impositions as Bruneau might term them. They are not only symptomatic of Theravāda Buddhist practices, such as meditation and other ways that will be referred to later, but they also serve as deep and widely dispersed metaphors in the vocabulary of Theravāda discourse. The same metaphorical uses of silence and stillness, deployed to explain the ways and means of the path, are imposed again when attempts are made to describe its conclusion.

The metaphorical use of stillness and silence is extensively called upon to express the character of the spiritual goal, *nibbāna*, in as much as it can be intellectualised at all. Of *nibbāna* it is said 'its distinguishing mark is peace' (*Visuddimagga*, in Conze, *et al*, 1964:102). Though in actuality there are no distinctions or qualities in *nibbāna*, so that it is frequently described in terms of absence through the evocation

of renunciation and cessation: 'As in the ocean's midmost depth no wave is born, but all is still, so let the monk be still, be motionless...' (*Suttanipāta* 920 in Conze, *et al*, 1964). Practitioner are led to the cessation of all discrimination and form in *nibbāna* through a state of repose and pacification of the mind.

The earliest of the British Forest Sangha monasteries, established in 1981, is known as *Cittaviveka*, a word which translates from Pali to English as 'the silent mind' - *viveka* means 'separated' or 'above' and so designates 'no social discourse' (Carrithers 1983). The silent mind is achieved firstly through an everyday morality based on Buddhist precepts and, in the case of monks, the monastic codes of the *vinaya*. Lay people and monks in Britain use indigenous and homely terms to explain that a guilty conscience makes meditation a more difficult prospect. Secondly, the scriptural and homiletic tradition views meditation as being supported by *dana* or generosity. For lay people *dana* also refers to donations for the material support of the *sangha*. Thirdly, there is *bhavana*, mental culture through meditation, which depends on the previous two for success.

In Britain the Forest Sangha monks teach lay people a form of meditation known as insight meditation (Pali - *vipassanā*). Winston King, who has made a study of meditation in modern Burma, suggests that *vipassanā* is the form of meditation most appropriate for lay people and judges it to be 'the living existential essence of the Theravāda world view...' (1980:82). It is the means through which the meditator acts out Theravāda ideology in both a psychological and physical sense. A method of *vipassanā*, known as 'bare attention' was developed by a Burmese monk, Ven. U Narada, and eventually spread among lay meditators in Asia and thence to Britain. The method is based on a fresh interpretation of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and confines the meditator to attend to whatever perceptions, feelings or thoughts arise during the period of meditation without reacting to them. The technique is intended to cultivate insight into the impermanent nature of phenomena and the compound nature of self. It was brought before a British audience by the German born monk, Nyanaponika of the Island Hermitage in Sri Lanka, in what became one of the most popular meditation manuals to be consulted by British Theravāda Buddhists. Nyanaponika's book, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, was first published in Britain in 1962 and ten years later ran into its fourth edition.

Bare attention is intended to bring the meditator an experiential understanding of the Buddha's teaching of Dependent Origination (Pali - *paticca-samuppāda*), on how and why impermanence and unstisfactoriness are intrinsic features of existence. Through bare attention a great deal is revealed to the attentive meditator about the workings of his or her own mind, the workings of the emotions and the powers of reasoning, uncovering disguised motives and other previously hidden aspects of a person's mental life. The result is the unleashing of untapped sources of energy, knowledge and capacities, and the strengthening of self-confidence 'so important', according to Nyanaponika, for inner progress.

Nyanaponika maintains that the instrumental benefits that accrue from meditation are necessary for the patient and continuous application of the method. In other words, benefits that assist worldly life are by-products of the methods, albeit welcome ones. The real goal is 'that direct confrontation with actuality, which is to mature into insight' (Nyanaponika 1962: 44). Insight is a means of self-transformation, making the meditator more receptive and sensitive to fellow human and other beings, and hence skilful (Pali - *kusala*) in his dealings. Silence and stillness are therefore endowed with moral value. Nyanaponika makes this clear in a quote from the popular Theravāda text, the *Dhammapada*:

> By self alone is evil done, by self one is defiled. By self is evil left undone, by self alone is one purified. Pure and impure on self alone depends: No one can make another pure. (ibid: 77)

In Theravāda Buddhism the temporal and spatial frame within which this spiritual work of self improvement and purification is carried out is that of *intracommunication*. In meditation the perceptual processing is deliberately slowed by the imposition of silence. Once this psychological exercise is established and continuously facilitated through repeated performance, the meditator is said to cultivate the kind of 'mindfulness' that leads to aware and enlightened forms of *intercommunication*. A member of the British Forest Sangha, Ajahn Tiradhammo, wrote in one of the many homiletic books that are published through lay people's donations and distributed free of charge:

Such little space is given in our society to silence. Words have become so loud and powerful these days that sometimes that is all we hear. But it is the very space of silence that gives us access to, and nurtures, another way of relating. How wonderful to be a child again and not be limited by words! (Tiradhammo 1989:94)

The dangers inherent in certain types of utterance are a repeated theme in Theravāda Buddhist texts and frequently form the subject of sermons given by the British monks to their lay followers. Restraint of body, speech and mind are urged and Right Speech figures as one of the eight 'limbs' of the Buddhist path to spiritual liberation. Constraint of utterance also features in the five precepts of the laity as abstention from untruth. The use of silence instead of speech and the stress on appropriate speech therefore fall within the communicative repertoire of the monastery, which in Britain is a place inhabited by a high proportion of lay guests as well as those who come for brief visits lasting a few hours. (8)

Within this arena lay people who are serious about their Buddhism are encouraged to emulate the monks in exercising restraint in their utterances. This means forswearing idle gossip and speculation which may smear the reputation of another, or lead to misunderstanding, as well as avoiding exaggeration, argumentative postures and derogatory remarks about others. Most admit to finding this a most difficult instruction to follow, both in and out of the monastery. It is quite common for people at the monastery to check themselves in mid-stream of a conversation and self-consciously change tack as they hear themselves embarking on what they judge to be an infringement.

Such conventions of behaviour within the monastery are referred to by British Theravāda Buddhists as the *form*, although sometimes usage of the term may refer to the Theravāda itself, as opposed to some other school of Buddhism. The main behavioural features of the *form* involve polite, measured and restrained voice, movement and deed. It is *bad form* for an adult to run; to shout; to argue; to shriek with laughter or display too much excitement; to assert oneself forcefully, to interrupt conversations, especially those of monks or nuns, to dance or listen to music; to gossip about the business of others; to tell untruths about oneself or others; to swear; to boast about spiritual attainment; to drink alcohol; to eat greedily or to

eat anything but tiny amounts of permitted foods after noon; to be wasteful; to act in a flirtatious or immodest manner; to wear shoes indoors, lay down except when resting in bed; touch monks, nuns or novices, including shaking hands in greeting. It is *good form* to be respectful to monks and nuns or if you are a monk or nun to be respectful to one's seniors and to the Abbot; to act in a quiet and kindly way towards others; to raise problems in a manner that eschews blame or anger; to share resources; to be generous; to offer assistance to others; to be good humoured; to avoid creating dissent; to ameliorate dissent; to avoid harm to living creatures; to harbour resources. Through these interactive strategies *form* exists not merely as a means of social control, but also as a means of communication, a compelling dramaturgical performance in which all comers necessarily participate. Elsewhere in this paper, when describing the Quaker meeting for worship, Collins says that it is as if 'participants have been issued with a blank score though the key and instrumentation is provided through past performance'. Undoubtedly, the same simile maybe applied to the improvised manipulation of stillness and silence that results in the quietism of a British Buddhist monastery.

One aspect of the British monastic *form* centres around segregation by gender and religious status. The largest and most frequently visited monastery is situated in Hertfordshire and known as Amarāvati (the Deathless Realm) - a synonym for *nibbāna*. Here, as elsewhere, lay people occupy separate lodgings to those of monks, nuns and those who are training to become monks and nuns (*anāgarika/anāgarikā*). Monks and nuns also dwell in separate buildings as do male and female guests. But all are brought together each day for the important communal ritual performance of evening *puja*, when the monks and nuns chant sacred texts, prior to an hour of meditation. The lay people sit at the rear of the meditation hall facing the nuns who are to the left of the shrine. The nuns and monks are lined up according to seniority, which is calculated not upon age, but upon the duration of time spent as a monk or a nun. The most senior is placed closest to the shrine. The seating arrangements as a whole, together with the shrine, form a square with open space in the middle.

If Ajahn Sumedho, the spiritual leader of this community, is present he sits at the foot of the shrine facing the lay people. They are divided in two halves with the men sitting to the right, thereby associating with the monks and the women to the left,

associating with the nuns. The personal space occupied by each individual is marked out by the allocation of bounded personal space. However, separateness of identity, while marked, is simultaneously merged in the corporate nature of the enterprise - to gather for meditation before the shrine. The *buddha-rūpa* becomes a focus that unifies the community of practitioners (Pali - *sāvaka-sangha*), who embody his still and silent form in each motionless posture.

Chanting is intended to calm the minds of performers and listeners. It is performed by monks and some lay people, using both Pali and English, though often it is only the monks who are capable of rendering the least well known of the formulae and the longer *suttas*. The essential point about the chanting is the synchronisation of pitch, tempo and speed so that all voices blend together as one. The resulting sound unwinds in a seamless whole, emphasising the congregational aspect of the meditation to follow, which is particularly significant for the visiting lay people who most often meditate at home alone. Many find that it is difficult to maintain a regular meditation practice in isolation. Some say that they schedule their evening meditation to coincide with that of the monastery and picture themselves as joined to the congregation. There are a number of meditation groups around the country that are affiliated to the Forest Sangha monasteries, but they rarely meet for meditation more than once a week. Meditators talk about how they feel the need to participate with others in order to find 'support' for their practice. Among the followers of the Forest Sangha in Britain there seems to have developed a congregational form of meditation which is far less common in Asia.

In one case a man abandoned his regular meditation practice due to conditions at home and associated personal problems. Yet he visited the monastery regularly in order to sit in the same room as the meditators because he claimed that the intensity of the shared silence benefited his own spiritual well-being. His remark raises the point that when empty of people the meditation hall is quiet and peaceful, but with more than a hundred meditators it is filled by a tangible, felt silence. Such a silence is rendered intelligible and significant because it is the product of shared purpose and affect. While it takes only a single person to generate utterance, it 'requires the co-operation of all' (Pittenger, Hockett and Danehy, cited in Jaworski 1993:18) to generate silence.

Conclusions

It is apparent from the two case studies presented here that even when it is deployed in the same domain, in these instances the domain of religion, silence may communicate different metaphysical interpretations. For example, among Quakers silence is often said to be filled with the presence of God, whereas in Buddhism it is filled with faith in the Buddha's teaching or *dhamma*: the first is primarily spiritual, the second, moral. But there are also differences of a sociological nature that relate to particular circumstances. We have sketched how the Quakers' tendency to privilege silence and advance a cautious approach to speech evolved historically partly as a form of religious dissidence during the second half of the seventeenth century. Speech to some extent represented the outward religious forms which Quakers opposed. Shared silence was considered egalitarian, and this was acknowledged by their opponents within the dominant religious and political establishment who sought to disrupt and destroy Quaker meetings for worship.

In a less dramatic way, contemporary Theravāda Buddhists are also dissenters who characterise the social world beyond the monastery as a maelstrom of noise and heedless activity. Conversations and comments reveal a general view that, due to a proliferation of mass communication and consumerism, the world at large is too busy speaking and spending to listen to itself. The monastery is thus perceived as an island of reflection and spiritual refreshment. In both cases silence binds the participants and distances the rest. However, though their rhetoric and practice of silence distinguishes these British Theravāda Buddhists from other groups within British society, it serves as a powerful connection with their origins in Thailand and locates them within the wider stream of Theravāda history and culture. The British Theravāda Buddhists are keen to associate themselves with orthodox Theravāda Buddhism and to maintain the respect and acknowledgement of Buddhists in Asia, particularly the Thai ecclesiastical establishment. There are several reasons for this, not least because wealthy Thai lay people are prepared to support the British monks as disciples of the much revered Ajalm Chah, but also because the monks want to distinguish themselves from new religious movements which have a negative public image through being portrayed in the British media as dangerous cults. Hence, Theravāda Buddhists seek to present themselves as adherents of a venerable tradition.

These socio-historical factors highlight and explain some of the differences between our case studies. For example, the Buddhist meditation hall is simple, but the Quaker meeting room is plain. Plainness is an outcome of the Quakers' structural opposition to mainstream Anglican Christianity and their divorce from what Collins describes as the typical religious appurtenances of Anglicanism. The iconographic silence of the Quaker meeting marks this dissension, whereas the ubiquitous presence of the Buddha image is a fulsome declaration of legitimacy and inclusion within the Theravādin fold.

Despite the contrasts referred to above the ethnographic material deriving from these diverse traditions displays a certain interpretative convergence in relation to silence as practice and performance. Both Theravāda Buddhism and Quakerism, as religious traditions, maintain a historically grounded ritual founded on silence, stillness and a tendency to simplification of all forms. In terms of Poyatos' 'basic triple structure' silence and stillness do, in these cases, enable practitioners to explore 'the meaning of meaning'. The iconic presence of the *buddharūpa* in the one instance and the symbolic valency of the silent meeting on the other enable performers to construct a sacred space in which they are prompted to metaphorise the numinous. In Bruneau's terms silence can be made to stand for the numinous and through the concept of 'psycholinguistic slow time' silence is also associated with our cognitive capacity to create metaphor (Bruneau 1973:22).

The exertion of silencing the mind is central to both Quaker and Theravāda Buddhist practice. In Buddhism the imposition of mental silence is intended to expand the meditators' mental horizons to encompass a boundless reality. Quakers, as we have seen, are called to 'love silence even in the mind' because too much thinking, as well as speaking, 'exhausts the spirit' which is thereby rendered 'less receptive to God'. Mental silence in both instances represents a notion of psychological discipline designed to facilitate by direct penetration those spiritual realms that are otherwise, and most often, apprehended symbolically.

There appear to be two distinct but related functions of silence among both Quakers and Buddhists that relate to Bruneau's theory. Our ethnography makes clear that Quakers and Buddhists employ the imposition of silence as a technique, a kind of inner technology and basis for spiritual work. But silence is also deployed as a

multi-valenced metaphor. Silence is used to stand for the nature of the spiritual goal which cannot be satisfactorily defined in language. This is most striking among Buddhists, but it is also true for Quakers, as in, for example, the notion that silence 'makes room for God'. Furthermore, among Quakers it has been demonstrated that silent meeting, the communion of silence, is a symbol of group identity. While for British Buddhists the collective silence of the meditation room represents the sharing of an endeavour that is freely acknowledged to be difficult to pursue alone. However, if, as Bruneau suggests, silence is implicated in the processes of making things, people and events meaningful and symbolic, we should not be surprised to find that concepts signifying silence and stillness are themselves deployed metaphorically.

The creativity of metaphorical movement permits even the contrast between silence as technique and silence as metaphor to be grasped and wrought into a symbol of paradox, as in the following verse written by an anonymous British Theravāda lay Buddhist - Sitting together,/ is not the absence of noise/ but the presence of silence/ which invites us to experience/ the reality of communion,/ the communion of reality. As Long argues, silence is a fundamentally ontological condition in that 'it refers to the manner in which a reality has its existence' (Long 1969:150).

Silence, for both British Theravāda Buddhists and Quakers is a vital aspect both of self-definition and of communal identity. As Cohen says, '...community is largely in the mind. As a mental construct, it condenses symbolically, and adeptly its bearers' social theories of similarity and difference. It becomes an eloquent and collective emblem of their social selves' (1985:115). In our examples, the identity of each community is defined partially through the emphasis each places on the existential and moral importance of silence. For each it is a moral as well as a religious imperative to discipline the ego in order that what we gloss as the numinous be realised. It is moral in the sense that only through such realisation can our true humanity be manifested: it is Good as well as good to be silent.

The moral value attached to silence and stillness by both Buddhists and Quakers is made explicit in their respective critiques of speech. In both traditions silence and stillness are perceived as acting upon persons in such a way as to transform their experience of themselves so as to make their behaviour towards others more

sensitive, empathetic and skilful. But silence and stillness not only inform prescriptions for virtuous living and the orientation of the individual towards religious goals, they are realised iconographically and architecturally. In our two examples the aesthetic and an ethical dimensions of quietism interact and reinforce one another in particular and significant ways.

In Buddhism meditators are taught that their efforts will be fruitless unless they are founded on a basis of sound moral behaviour, which for monks is exemplified in their monastic discipline and for lay people in a ceremony known as taking of the Five Precepts. In a brief ritual, most often performed before an image of the Buddha and in the presence of a monk, the lay person announces his or her intention to refrain from: destroying living creatures; taking that which is not given; sexual misconduct; incorrect speech; intoxicating liquors and drugs which lead to carelessness. It is stipulated that Quakers come to meeting with 'heart and mind prepared' (*Quaker Faith and Practice* 1.02 [the ninth of the Advices and Queries]).

In each case the form of the performance of silence is canonically defined. But the ethnography indicates that this does not mean that the canonic form is experienced in the same way by all participants. There are several levels of interpretation, here: the canonic, the vernacular or local, that of individual participants, as well as the anthropological interpretation we have ourselves attempted. We agree with Jaworski's criticism of essentialist accounts of silence:

> Silence and speech do not stand in total opposition to each other, but form a continuum of forms ranging from the most prototypical instances of silence to the most prototypical instances of speech (Jaworski 1993:30-34).

We have found, that silence, like talk/noise, is gradable. Silence may be more or less present, more or less meaningful. There is a prototypical silence which lies at one end of the spectrum and which in Quakerism may be described as the *gathered meeting* and in Theravāda Buddhism as the *silent mind*. We cannot deny practitioners' claims to experience 'perfect silence', though in practice silence in these traditions can, and often does, fall short of the prototype.

Furthermore, we suggest that when approaching silence we should not only demonstrate a speech/silence dichotomy but might consider whether or not silence, a fundamental aspect of the medium of communication, is a part of a genre which privileges absence in the profane or secular sphere in order to invoke and evoke the presence of the numinous. We believe that the performance of silence can be better understood if the context of performance is explored as fully as possible - including its historical context. We therefore conclude that an ethnographic approach is especially valuable in any attempt to understand silence.

We have implied throughout this paper that silence can and should be viewed from various perspectives. An interpretative prism better enables us to identify and assess the historical development and contemporary meaning of silence as it is performed in different religious traditions. We have found that in the traditions we have studied silence is made to operate as a potent symbol and conduit for religious experience. Symbols are polyvalent and silence is made, by practitioners, to metaphorise inner states and define their opposition to the mundane world.

Acknowledgements

Notes
(1). This is especially true with regard to silence within the context of religious practice (exceptions include Baer 1976, Ciani 1987, Jaksa & Stech 1978, Bauman 1983, Maltz 1985, Flanagan 1985).
(2). With some notable exceptions (for instance Basso 1972, Nwoye 1985).
(3). Maltz (1985) argues that 'noise' (glossolalia or 'speaking in tongues') operated similarly as a metaphor of dissent within the Pentecostalist tradition.
(4). See also Collins 1996. A similar point is made by Lippard (1988) though he bases his argument on Burke's theory of rhetoric.

(5). One Friend pointed out to me the difference between 'necessary' and 'unnecessary' noise (during worship). The former can be (needs to be?) tolerated while the latter causes annoyance and discomfort. Birdsong is 'necessary'; a Friend ferretting around in a plastic bag or allowing an electric watch to beep are not. Clearly the distinction might be a source of contention.
(6). See also Dandelion 1996:250-52.
(7). For an interesting discussion of ritual as performance see Tambiah 1979.
(8). Elsewhere Bell has written of the monastery as a performative arena in which specifically Buddhist ways of structuring activities, relationships and time are observed (Bell 1995).

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Sandra Bell is a lecturer in anthropology at the University of Durham. Her research interests include Buddhism, the Western Himalayas (where she has carried out fieldwork) and religious change. She is currently preparing for publication a book on Buddhism in the UK and USA.

Peter Collins is a lecturer in anthropology at the University of Durham. He has published a number of articles on Quakerism. His current research interests include the social construction of stress.

Mailing Address:
Department of Anthropology, University of Durham, 43 Old Elvet
Durham. DH1 3HN
e-mail: Sandra.Bell@durham.ac.uk, and   P.J.Collins@durham.ac.uk