Acts makes it very clear that the only story you can know is that of the past. It shows us that our present is placed in relation to the past and our future imaginable only as a retelling of familiar stories. What makes *Acts* different from the romance it resembles or the historiography it imitates is that the past in it remains open, its meaning richly awaiting future realisation. The end is not conclusive, not a happily-ever-after that our past experience must label 'escapist', or at best, fictitious. It, like the audience's present moment and moments yet to come, is a point in a history foreknown, promised, meaningful already because of the presence in that history of the death and resurrection of Christ.

1 Richard I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight*, Philadelphia, 1987
2 Brian Reardon, *The Form of Greek Romance* (Princeton, 1991)
3 H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke, London,* 1960, p.213.
4 I prefer this translation to that which reads 'in the farthest corners of the earth', as it contains, if only implicitly, the temporal dimension along with the spatial which is essential to the vision of progress in *Acts*, as it was in Luke's gospel.

Silence, Metaphor and the Communication of Religious Meaning Part I

Chris Arthur

A Tale of Two Thought-Worlds

In his important study of *The New Era in Religious Communication*, Pierre Babin offers a startling juxtaposition of two very different thought-world.[1] First, he introduces us to the practice, among some Indian tribes living in the Canadian wilderness, of plugging children's nostrils and covering their eyes soon after birth, the better to attune them to the noises of the forest in which they will have to survive. Then, in stark contrast to these "hyperauditory" individuals, made alert to the subtlest natural sounds: the whisper of snow falling on the leafless branches of aspen and birch, the footfalls of deer in soft summer mud, the long indrawn breath

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of a hibernating bear and so on, Babin invites readers to consider a modern American adolescent reared in front of the brash sights and sounds of the TV screen. Such an individual will have logged some 20,000 hours of viewing by the age of sixteen. How, Babin asks, can these two individuals be supposed to have the same reference range or to have a similar idea of God and the transcendent? Is it possible that their sense of the holy could follow even remotely similar contours or be effectively explored or addressed by a single method of approach?

To some extent, the hyperauditory Indian and the media-saturated American can be taken as representing two forms of consciousness and communication which Babin spends much of his book outlining. On the one hand there is the linear, analytic, and alphabetical mode. Despite its dependence on print-media, this, according to Babin, is the sort of outlook which still dominates Western society and which the American couch-potato will subscribe to. The world is fragmented and considered serially in little gobbets of isolated information, which may have no direct significance to the life of the individual exposed to them, and between which there is often no meaningful connection. On the other hand, there is a more intuitive, synthetic, and holistic approach. The Indian, says Babin, is sensitive to all the connections and anomalies of a given environment, which is seen as an interdependent whole in which the individual is an integral part. Both modes of perception are of value. Whilst one primarily addresses the intellect, the other addresses the quite different logic of our feelings. Babin is critical of an imbalance which, he argues, has become the norm in Western society, where the cognitive is so over-emphasized that the affective has become atrophied and is in urgent need of rehabilitation. He is particularly concerned with the way in which this imbalance can limit the understanding of religion and how different media of communication can be used to remedy or reinforce it. For Babin, "the most important effect of the sacred is the creation of an inner silence".[2] And the principal role of religion in a contemporary setting, he believes, lies in "reintroducing silence into communication."[3]

At many points, Babin's work invites comparison with ideas expressed by Rudolf Otto in *The Idea of the Holy*. *Otto* was concerned that what he saw as "the real innermost core"[4] of any religion, namely the numinous, had been marginalised and ignored by our preoccupation with rationality. The result, so he claimed, was a distorted picture of religion, since the holy is an intimately interwoven web of rational and non-rational factors. Otto was keen to promote a more balanced approach. Babin is likewise eager to plot a theologically therapeutic middle way between what he sees as unnaturally sundered ways of understanding and communicating religious meaning.

In this article I want to consider whether Religious Studies can avoid contributing to the imbalance in our understanding of religion which Babin and Otto decry. Or, to put this in a slightly different way, D.T. Suzuki once described religion as "the communication of silence without breaking the silence."[5] Is Religious Studies as a discipline methodologically committed to doing violence to this crucial aspect of its subject matter?

Listening to Silence

With some small adjustments, we can use Babin's image of the hyperauditory Indian to picture in general terms what Religious Studies is attempting to do. Rather than suffering nostril blocking or blindfolding at the hands of some matriarchal figure intent on selective sensory deprivation and enhancement, it is the specialism of the discipline that attunes our ear to listen out for very particular sounds. The keenness and range of the specialist listening which Religious Studies engages in is impressive. Out of the complex myriad of interconnecting, overlapping sounds in the cacophony of what Ninian Smart has termed the "geopolis" (or "world city"),[6] the discipline has systematically isolated, described, and analysed virtually the whole astonishing scale of human religiousness. Even a cursory glance at the subject's main reference work, the sixteen-volume *Encyclopedia of Religion*, brought together under the editorship of Mircea Eliade, is enough to impress the mind with the skill, elegance, and stamina of the listening which Religious Studies has engaged in. Acute and painstaking though the professional eavesdropping of Religious Studies may have been, however, if it has omitted to listen to and record the potent silence which seems to lie at the heart of the phenomena with which it is concerned, then it is open to the accusation of having missed out what is most important of all.

That silence might be valued for its own sake, rather than as the auditory *tabula rasa* which facilitates the appearance of sound, is a point which is effectively made in one of Heinrich Böll's short stories, in the collection translated by Leila Vennevitz.[7] The story is set in a fictional broadcasting station and focuses on the work of a producer in the Cultural Department. It is a story replete with meaning for broadcasters, scholars, teachers, politicians—all those concerned in one way or another with communication, history, truth, and other such weighty matters. It repays several careful readings since, beneath the disarming simplicity of its author's style, there lurk many profound and disturbing questions.

The producer on whom the story centres is called Murke and, in barest outline, it deals with the following incident. The great Professor Bur-Malottke, a regular contributor to the Cultural Department's

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programmes, has been responsible for a number of talks on art, culture, and religion. He undergoes a reassessment of his theological position, as a result of which he insists on deleting the word "God" from all of his talks and replacing it with the phrase "that higher being whom we revere". The unenviable job of going through the archives, listening to hours of Bur-Malottke's talks, isolating each instance of "God", cutting the tape and splicing in "that higher being whom we revere", is given to Murke. Murke, incidentally, loathes the professor, to the extent that he makes him re-record his utterances of "that higher being whom we revere" over and over again, thus adding a grimly comic aspect to the proceedings.

Meanwhile, a colleague of Murke's, working in the Drama Department, is unhappy with the ending of a radio play he is producing, the closing scene of which is in a deserted church with an atheist asking three questions: "Who will remember me when I have become the prey of worms?" "Who will wait for me when I have turned into dust?" "Who will remember me when I have turned into leaves?" After each question there is a long silence. The drama producer decides that it would be much better if, instead of silence, a voice answered each question with "God". Bur-Malottke's discarded utterances of "God" are promptly spliced in and the silences taken out.

There are all sorts of points in the story that are relevant to important issues in media ethics: matters of distortion, deception, editorial freedom, attempting to re-write the past, the extent to which the demands of a medium should be allowed to determine the messages it carries, artistic integrity, and so on. However, the aspect of the story which I want to stress here involves silence. For Murke collects silence. Whenever he is cutting a tape, if a moment of silence is taken out, he hoards it jealously, adding to a master-tape of silence which, at the time of the story, and despite his repeated requests to his girlfriend to record some of her silence for him, runs for only a few precious minutes. When Bur-Malottke's repeated utterance of "God" is used to replace the periods of silence in the radio drama, these are presented to a grateful Murke who treasures them as gifts of high value.

Whether or not we find the idea of collecting it on tape and listening to it absurd, there is no doubt that silence is an important religious phenomenon. Perhaps the most economical way of illustrating this is by taking two brief quotations from the two encyclopedias that have been the main reference repositories of Religious Studies at different periods in its history: Hastings' *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* and Eliade's *Encyclopedia of Religion*. First, Hastings, from an article by R. M. Jones:

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> Silence, as an aid to worship or as a method of preparing the soul for spiritual experiences, has been practised among larger or smaller groups in almost all periods of religious history and in almost all parts of the world.[8]

Secondly, Eliade's *Encyclopedia of Religion*, from an article by Elizabeth McCumsey:

> Silence is one of the essential elements in all religions. It lies behind the words, supports the rituals and shapes the way of life, whatever the actual words, rituals and way of life may be.[9]

Further reinforcement of this kind of valuation of silence can be found in Van der Leeuw's *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, a book which has acquired near canonical status in the history of that phenomenological strand in Religious Studies which has had so profound an effect on the subject's methodology. According to Van der Leeuw:

> Universally, mysticism seeks silence: the strength of the power with which it deals is so great that only silence can create a "situation" for it . . . that mysticism has always been very eloquent is only the reverse of its essential silence.[10]

If, using Paul van Buren's phrase, we take mysticism as "an extreme form of what is genuine in religion",[11] rather than seeing it as some sort of idiosyncratic or deviant offshoot from it, then clearly Van der Leeuw's remark has enormous relevance for the study of religion: his analysis would suggest that what we are looking at purports to deal with something so potent that only silence can, as he puts it, "create a situation for it".

The centrality and significance of silence in a religious context is also something touched on in the work of the Religious Experience Research Unit, which has been engaged in the study of such experience in contemporary British society. In *The Spiritual Nature of Man*, Alister Hardy, the founder of the unit, lists silence among the antecedents or "triggers" of religious experience'.[12] Similarly David Hay, who has continued Hardy's work, claims that "the typical situation in which [religious experience] takes place is one of solitude and silence".[13]

Silence, then, is clearly something of fundamental religious importance, and to a certain limited extent this *is* acknowledged in the study of religion. And yet, in the same way that a radio producer who collects silence and values it above words would be viewed as, at the very least, eccentric, so one suspects that a practitioner of Religious Studies might be looked at somewhat askance if his or her attention

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turned to this particular topic. Can the discipline cope with the phenomenon of silence, or are the media used by Religious Studies as ill-suited to dealing with it as radio, where silence is about as welcome as invisibility would be on TV? Beyond noting its importance in a fairly general way, in the manner of the two encyclopedia entries, can anything useful be said about silence?

Talking About Silence

Many writers who turn their attention to silence end up, not surprisingly, saying very little. This does not mean that quantitatively they devote fewer words to this essentially wordless topic than they do to other subjects, but rather that what they say tends to take the form of rather vague, if not altogether gnomic utterances. "Under all speech that is good for anything", writes Carlyle, "lies a silence that is better. Silence is deep as eternity; speech as shallow as time."[14] "Silence", says Henry David Thoreau, "has no end; speech is but the beginning of it."[15] "Language", according to the author of an article in the *Downside Review* in 1980, "is the ladder by which silence is reached."[16] Nietzsche may have been right about a good aphorism being too hard for the tooth of time, but if it is indigestible to the inquiring intellect as well, then its apparent longevity is surely of dubious value. Whilst some writings on silence may have a certain aphoristic charm about them, it is not always easy to come to grips with what they actually mean, and one is left more than a little suspicious that beneath their verbal display there may be little useful substance.

As Bernard Dauenhauer, one of the few contemporary thinkers to turn his attention to this topic, has remarked:

> Though the issue of language has for many years been at centerstage for philosophers of many persuasions, an important facet of communication, namely silence, has largely gone unnoticed. Even when the phenomenon of silence *has* been noticed it has generally not been dealt with thematically.[17]

Criticizing figures such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty for their minimal and cryptic treatment, Dauenhauer cites Max Picard as "the only recent thinker to examine in detail the positive phenomenon of silence".[18] But a reading of Picard's *The World of Silence* suggests that he is not so much an analyst of silence as an ecologist of the spirit or a social critic, convinced that modern urban existence is radically unsilent, and concerned to present its relentless noise as something spiritually detrimental.

Dauenhauer's assessment of the neglect of silence as a topic of

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philosophical interest is echoed by L.K. Tong, though with the important qualification that such neglect is a characteristically Western phenomenon. By contrast, within the Eastern religio-philosophical tradition, silence has always occupied an important place, indeed Tong sees it as the abiding "underlying concern of Eastern philosophy".[19] Tong makes the point that:

> In so far as traditional Western philosophy is concerned, [the question "what is silence?"] cannot have arisen because silence has rarely been *practised*, if at all, by Western philosophers. Without an authentic experience of silence, it is difficult for them to see its true meaning, let alone its necessity. This inability to appreciate the positive significance of silence is closely connected with their failure to grasp the real import of nothingness.[20]

Moving from a philosophical to a religious emphasis, Abhisiktananda echoes Tong's claim that when it comes to silence West can learn from East:

> Christian spiritual discipline has this to learn from yoga—to strive by any effective and acceptable means for quiet and silence in the mind. Such quiet and silence alone make it possible for the Holy Spirit to work freely in the soul.[21]

Though there are no doubt some interesting contrasts to be drawn between attitudes to silence in East and West, we would do well to treat any generalization with caution. In modern Western art, literature, music, and philosophy there is clear evidence of a new significance being given to silence. Thus in the work of figures as diverse as Rothko, Beckett, Webern and Wittgenstein, we find that silence, or its visual equivalent, unfilled space, plays an important part.

For some, this new emphasis on silence betokens a pessimistic or even destructive element in twentieth century thought. In his study of nihilism, for example, Stanley Rosen presents the treatment of silence which occurs in the philosophies of Wittgenstein and Heidegger as a trend towards intellectual negativism,[22] whilst Ihab Hassan, in his examination of the writings of Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett (aptly entitled *The Literature of Silence*), suggests that the pursuit of silence found there presents a fundamental challenge to literary tradition and is, perhaps, better seen in consequence as constituting anti-literature rather than literature.[23]

Others evaluate this undercurrent of silence more positively. Thus George Steiner celebrates the revaluation of silence which he sees taking place in "the epistemology of Wittgenstein, in the aesthetics of Webern

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and Cage, [and] in the poetics of Beckett",[24] as "one of the most original characteristics of the modern spirit".[25] For Steiner, such silence is a positive and appropriate response to "the exhaustion of verbal resources in modern civilization."[26] And, in a passage reminiscent of Van der Leeuw's remarks on eloquence and silence in mysticism, he suggests that:

> It is just because we can go no further, because speech so marvellously fails us, that we experience the certitude of a divine meaning surpassing and enfolding ours.[27]

1 Pierre Babin, *The New Era in Religious Communication*, tr. David Smith, Minneapolis:1991, pp 56-57.
2. Ibid., p 118.
3 Ibid., p 120.
4 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, tr. John W Harvey, London:1923, p 6.
5 Quoted (from Suzuki's *Mysticism Christian and Buddhist*) by John H Morgan in "Silence as Creative Therapy: a Contemplative Approach to Pastoral Care", *Journal of Pastoral Care*, Vol. 29 (1975), p 249.
6 Ninian Smart, *Beyond Ideology, Religion and the Future of Western Civilization*, London: 1981, p 21.
7 *The Stories of Heinrich Böll*, tr. Leila Vennevitz, London: 1988. The story in question is "Murke's Collected Silences", pp 495–513.
8 Rufus M Jones, "Silence", in James Hastings (ed.), the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Edinburgh:1920, 12 vols.
9 Elizabeth McCumsey, "Silence", in Mircea Eliade (ed.), the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, New York:1987, 16 vols.
10 Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, tr. J E Turner, London:1938, p 433.
11 Paul van Buren, *The Edges of Language*, London:1972, p 157.
12 Alister Hardy, *The Spiritual Nature of Man*, Oxford: 1979, p 28.
13 David Hay, *Exploring Inner Space*, Harmondsworth: 1982, p 28.
14 Thomas Carlyle, *Essays*, "Memoirs of the Life of Scott", quoted in *Stevenson's Dictionary of Quotations*, p 1823.
15 Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, entry for February 9 1841.
16 Seraphina Lansdown, "The Language of Silence", the *Downside Review*, Vol. 98 (1980), pp 1–2.
17 Bernard P Dauenhauer, "On Silence", *Research in Phenomenology*, Vol. 3 (1973), p. 9.
18 Ibid.
19 Lik Kuen Tong, "The Meaning of Philosophical Silence: Some Reflections on the Use of Language in Chinese Thought", *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. 3 (1976), p 169.
20 Ibid.
21 Abhisiktananda (Henri La Saux), *Prayer* London:1967, p 40.
22 Stanley Rosen, *Nihilism: a Philosophical Essay*, New Haven: 1969, as cited in Ramona Cormier, "Silence in Philosophy and Literature", *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 22 (1978), p 301.
23 Ihab Hassan, *The Literature of Silence*, New York: 1967, as cited by Cormier, op. cit.
24 George Steiner, *Language and Silence*, London:1967, p 67.
25 Ibid., pp 67–8.
26 Ibid., p 65.
27 Ibid., p 58.