

Ministers of Silence: Innocence and Counter-Narratives in the Writings of Thomas Merton

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In our postmodern context, we are confronted daily with a barrage of often conflicting stories whose tellers compete for authority in the larger project of constructing narratives by which we live. We simultaneously find ourselves in a 'crisis of imagination', ill-equipped to negotiate the complexities of our narratively-structured reality.¹ In this paper, I unpack the liberating potential of Thomas Merton's emphasis on silence in addressing the present 'crisis of imagination' from the context of prophetic ministry. Understanding silence both literally and figuratively, I will demonstrate the categorically subversive power of silence in relation to a dominant public discourse before exploring the liberating nature of silence with its potential for creating space to be filled by historically silenced voices.

Prophetic ministry has two complementary goals. On the one hand, the prophetic minister engages in prophetic energizing and prophetic truth-telling, empowering people to both celebrate the incipient presence of the reign of God and to mourn and resist the persistent challenge posed by the anti-reign, a dynamic which Walter Brueggemann develops extensively in *The Prophetic Imagination*.² On the other hand, borrowing Melinda McGarrah Sharp's description of pastoral theology today, the prophetic minister should 'participate in *encouraging* and *liberating* stories that have yet to be told while at the same time *resisting* whatever prevents the telling and hearing of stories.'³ Both goals are narratively structured: they involve revealing and engaging the narratives of the dominant ideology, which themselves claim ultimacy, and holding up a contrasting vision of the truly ultimate reign of God, and the marginalized or neglected narratives of the poor and disenfranchised which can reveal

the reign of God.

Thomas Merton proposes the virtue of 'silence' as a sort of refusal to participate in the dominant discourse. Thus 'silence' can mean both literal silence and a kind of 'narrative non-compliance'. Silence is an invaluable virtue for the prophetic minister's twofold task of heralding the reign of God and lifting up marginalized voices. As a non-productive, countercultural mode of expression, silence challenges the dominant discourse that privileges productivity and that produces a society overstimulated by the constant barrage of conflicting messages. Intentional silence, especially on the part of those with some power, furthermore creates space for historically silenced voices to rise up, naming their own reality and percolating into popular consciousness.

In his essay 'Message to Poets', Thomas Merton writes: 'We are the ministers of silence that is needed to cure all victims of absurdity who lie dying of a contrived joy.'⁴ What is it about our age that makes it absurd, that leaves its victims 'dying of a contrived joy'? And what is it about Merton's 'ministry of silence' — itself a form of prophetic ministry — that resuscitates the world's victims of absurdity? In *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann diagnoses three elements that, when present in a society, uphold the 'royal consciousness', which is Brueggemann's term for the dominant ideology. These three elements are an economics of affluence, a politics of oppression, and a religion of God's accessibility.⁵ Brueggemann's categories illuminate Merton's understanding of the pathologies of his world, which indeed persist in our own world today, contributing to the enthronement of discourses of death at the expense of the poor and marginalized. Regarding the first, it is within the comfort of an economics of affluence that 'a system can, without resort to overt force, *compel* people to live in conditions of abjection.'⁶ The politics of oppression, on the other hand, is that 'convenient mythology which simply legalizes the use of force by big criminals against little criminals — whose small-scale criminality is largely *caused* by the large-scale injustice under which they live.'⁷ Finally, it is within a religion of immanence, of instant gratification with no appreciation for the eschatological, that love becomes something that so easily 'trips...off the Christian tongue...that one gets the impression it means others ought to love us for standing on their necks.'⁸ Faced with the seeming absurdity of a human situation dominated by the powerful interests of a few, the minister is called to break through the haze of resignation and 'contrived joy' and to creatively forge new paths of communion.

Silence is subversive. Enmeshed as we are in our historical milieu marred by suffering, we can never completely 'opt out' of systems of oppression; but our silence represents both an acknowledgement of our complicity and a deference to the otherness of the 'something more' that we know to have the last word over death and destruction. A balance between speech and silence before suffering is important for the prophetic minister. While speaking out, seeking to give word to visions of the reign of God and to call out the persistence of the anti-reign, is necessary; it is also limited. Words can neither grasp the fullness of God and God's reign nor the radical negativity of suffering in history. Thus, Merton writes in his essay 'Message to Poets', 'Let us be proud of the words that are given to us for nothing; not to teach anyone, not to confute anyone, not to prove anyone absurd, but to point beyond all objects into the silence where nothing can be said.'⁹ A central task of prophetic ministry is the creation of spaces for open-eyed engagement with reality. This means equipping people to withstand the pain of standing naked before human suffering, stripped of opiates and analgesics, justifications and theodicies, and to limit their cry, if they cry out at all, to the pleading words of Habbukuk: 'How long, O Lord?'¹⁰ The prophetic minister leads people to understand that eyes open to suffering, however, are also open to the overflowing presence of God's grace. Put differently, it is only in honestly engaging with the horrific realities of the anti-reign that we can anticipate and celebrate the ways in which we find the reign of God already present in our midst.

Silence as narrative non-compliance facilitates a posture which Merton calls 'innocence'. This innocence begets a creative energy that allows the prophetic minister to flourish outside the categories imposed by the dominant consciousness and imagine new possibilities for humanity. Merton gives us what is perhaps his most poignant and concise image of innocence in his prose poem 'Hagia Sophia'. He writes:

We do not see the Child who is prisoner in all the people, and who says nothing. She smiles, for though they have bound her, she cannot be a prisoner. Not that she is strong, or clever, but simply that she does not understand imprisonment.¹¹

This innocence is not naïveté; rather it is a freedom, born of silence, to imagine a new reality from within the confines of the false consciousness imposed by the powers that be. It is creative because it allows her to seize 'upon reality in its moment of highest expectation and tension toward the

new.'¹² With eyes open to the brutal reality of suffering in the world, the prophetic minister refuses to accept as reality the ideology that justifies and perpetuates that suffering. She is able to see the anti-reign for what it is; and only by passing honestly through the suffering of the anti-reign can she see the abundant inbreakings of the reign of God. Attuned to the unitive delight of the reign, she can creatively endeavor to make its presence ever more felt, committed to a deep sense of joy and compassion for fellow human beings that indeed sustains her prophetic innocence before systems of death and domination.

For most of human history, the power to speak authoritatively—that is, to name reality and ultimacy—has rested in a few powerful hands. However, as Mary Catherine Hilkert writes, '[s]elf-definition and the power to name one's own experience are crucial not only to human identity, moral maturity, and political liberation but also to human experience of God.'¹³ In other words, the ability to name one's own reality and experience of God is a key element of coming into the fullness of our humanity, our subjectivity before God. When a few powerful voices relegate the majority of human beings to the status of objects, everyone's potential for subjectivity is curbed. In excluding entire swathes of the human population from the conversation, such a monopoly on authoritative speech, to borrow the language of Elizabeth Johnson, 'obscures the height and depth and length and breadth of divine mystery.'¹⁴

In a chapter on ethnopoliitical psychology, psychologist Lillian Comas-Diaz explains that 'individuals and groups need to assume control of their lives, overcome their false conscience and achieve a critical knowledge of themselves.'¹⁵ She alludes here to the idea of *concientización* or critical consciousness. Developed by Paolo Freire in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, *concientización* is one way of framing the process of claiming narrative agency on the part of marginalized groups.¹⁶ Through this lens, to claim narrative agency involves first an understanding of how one's life has been shaped by a web of power-laden narratives. It is then to ask: which narratives have shaped my life, and whom do they benefit? To what extent have my people been the authors of our own stories, and to what extent have we been pawns in the stories of others? For marginalized communities, to come into narrative agency is to realize the narrative structure of reality and to claim authorship of a community's own narrative, in a process of grassroots narrative construction.

We recall Melinda McGarrah Sharp's description of the pastoral theologian today: 'We participate in *encouraging* and *liberating* stories

that have yet to be told while at the same time *resisting* whatever prevents the telling and hearing of stories.¹⁷ For the prophetic minister, silence is a virtue that *encourages* and *liberates* stories from below insofar as silence creates space for those stories to be voiced. Furthermore, silence *resists* the crisis of imagination that prevents silenced voices from speaking or being heard. Merton's call to silence is an invitation to ministers to enter a mystical space where, in newly rediscovered innocence, we can hear with new ears the stories that populate the underside of history. They have been underfoot all along, as close as the underside of a carpet beneath our feet, but it is only in silence that we hear the call to begin to pull back the corners of the carpet.

Notes

1. I borrow the term 'crisis of imagination' from Christopher Pramuk. See Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2009), p. 275.
2. Jon Sobrino writes that 'the Kingdom of God appears as the good news in the midst of bad things, in the midst of the *anti-Kingdom*, that is. The Kingdom of God will not arrive, so to speak, from a *tabula rasa*, but from and against the anti-Kingdom that is formally and actively opposed to it.' He goes on to say that the Kingdom of God 'needs and generates a hope that is also liberating, from the understandable despair built up in history from the evidence that what triumphs in history is the anti-Kingdom.' (Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh, [Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993], p. 72.) I use anti-reign here as Sobrino uses anti-Kingdom, which is to say that 'anti-reign' represents all of the stark reminders in a world of suffering and injustice that, in its fullness, the reign of God has decidedly not yet come, and that the reign of God exists over and against that persistent suffering and injustice.
3. Melinda A. McGarrah Sharp, *Misunderstanding Stories: Toward a Postcolonial Pastoral Theology* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013), p. 265.
4. Thomas Merton, 'Message to Poets', in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 160.
5. Walter Brueggemann, 'Royal Consciousness: Countering the Counterculture', in *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 31.
6. Thomas Merton, 'Toward a Theology of Resistance', in *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1995), p. 7.
7. *Passion for Peace*, p. 4.
8. *Passion for Peace*, p. 8.
9. Thomas Merton, 'Message to Poets', p. 160.
10. Habakkuk 1:2.

11. Thomas Merton, 'Hagia Sophia', *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press, 1978), pp. 365-6. It was originally included in *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (1963).
12. Mary Catherine Hilker, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1997), p. 159.
13. *Naming Grace*, p. 159.
14. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), p. 18.
15. Lillian Comas-Diaz, 'Ethnopolitical Psychology: Healing and Transformation', in *Advancing Social Justice Through Clinical Practice*, ed. Etiony Aldarondo (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 93.
16. Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970). Narrative agency refers to the extent to which the narrator is autonomous, and has the power to affect his/her own life.
17. McGarrah Sharp, *Misunderstanding Stories*, p. 265.

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Did you know that

. . . . Merton might have gone to Oxford University?

From 1961 until his death Merton corresponded with Etta Gullick, an Anglican lecturer on theology who was married to an Oxford don.

from Merton's letter of July 1, 1961:

. . . Oriel, which nearly got me, but I escaped to Cambridge in time. (I probably would have done even worse at Oxford than at Cambridge.)

from Merton's letter of September 12, 1964:

I remember Oriel Hall and the exam I took there. They were going to give me a scholarship there the following year, probably, but I was put off by the noise in the High [Street] and went to Cambridge. I wonder what it would have been if I had gone to Oxford after all.

The letters may be found in *The Hidden Ground of Love*. Michael Mott, Merton's official biographer, was an undergraduate at Oriel (1948-1951).