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### **The Sound of Silence: Quasi-Mantric Prayer in Modern Christian Mystical Practices**

As a way of illustrating the type of practice I will discuss in this paper, I will begin with a brief description. On a Sunday evening, a group of six persons meets in an upstairs room at the Grace and Holy Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in downtown Kansas City. Once the group has gathered, a candle is lit, the lights are dimmed, and a small bell is rung. For the next twenty minutes, the participants sit in their chairs, eyes closed, in silence. Following this, the bell is rung again, signaling the end of the meditation period.

What I have described is a gathering of persons who practice a modern Christian contemplative method known as Centering Prayer. From this description, it may appear as if not much is taking place in this practice. Yet we must distinguish between what we can and cannot see. What we can see is a group of people sitting in a silence in which nothing is said and no sounds are produced by the participants. What we cannot see is the aspect of this practice that takes place within the consciousness of each of the practitioners, and which involves their repetition of a short word as they meditate. Thus this silent contemplative prayer includes a dimension of sound and language which, though unheard by the observer, plays a fundamental role in this meditative exercise. These contrasting elements of sound and silence comprise the dual foundations of this practice.

In this paper, I will discuss two modern Christian mystical practices—Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer—which each teach a form of meditative exercise that utilizes

the repetition of a verbal formula, or what I will call a “quasi-mantra.” It should be stated at the outset that my use of the term “mantra” is a general one, and refers simply to a verbal formula which is utilized as part of a spiritual practice. Because the use of mantras is most specifically associated with Indo-Tibetan religious traditions, I will use the term “quasi-mantra” to refer to these Christian practices. In this paper, I will describe and analyze the practices of Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer and their use of quasi-mantric prayer by drawing upon texts which offer instruction in each of these meditative exercises.

It is not particularly novel to suggest that language can play a role in triggering or structuring mystical experiences. Steven Katz makes an important point when he says that “language creates, when used by the mystical adept . . . the operative process through which the essential epistemic channels that permit mystical forms of knowing and being are made accessible.”<sup>1</sup> Building on this claim, the purpose of this paper is to ask how a linguistic tool—the quasi-mantra—functions as a method of mystical practice. More specifically, I will interpret these modern Christian mystical practices in terms of the inter-relationship between sound and silence which exists in their use of the quasi-mantra. In Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer, the sound and language of the quasi-mantra is oriented to silence, both in terms of the manner in which the quasi-mantra is employed in meditation, and in the mystical experience which is the goal of these practices.

### **Christian Meditation**

The first of the practices I will discuss, Christian Meditation, began to be taught by the Benedictine monk John Main in England and North America in the mid-1970s. Main

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<sup>1</sup>Steven T. Katz, “Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning,” in *Mysticism and Language*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 8.

summarizes the method of Christian Meditation with these instructions: “Sit relaxed but alert. Silently, interiorly begin to say a single word. We recommend the prayer-phrase ‘maranatha.’ Recite it as four syllables of equal length. Listen to it as you say it, gently but continuously. Do not think or imagine anything—spiritual or otherwise. If thoughts and images come, these are distractions at the time of meditation, so keep returning to simply saying the word.”<sup>2</sup>

From these instructions, we can see that an inter-relationship between the repetition of the mantra<sup>3</sup> and the experience of silence is a fundamental characteristic of Christian Meditation. Main alludes to this when he suggests, somewhat paradoxically, that the meditator listen to the mantra used in meditation, and that this practice is to be carried out in silence. He instructs the meditator to “simply, gently repeat that word in silence in your heart, in the depths of your being, and continue repeating it. Listen to it as a sound. Say it; articulate it in silence, clearly, but listen to it as a sound.”<sup>4</sup> An obvious tension exists in these instructions between the experiences of sound and silence as these interact with one another in the use of the mantra. On the one hand, Main teaches that the mantra is to be repeated in silence; he never teaches that the meditator should speak or so much as whisper the mantra. On the other hand, the meditator is instructed to listen to this mantra and to in some sense appreciate its sonic qualities, even though it has never been spoken in such a way as to manifest its sound.

While the mantra is a verbal formula and to some degree involves sound as part of its use, the practice of Christian Meditation is oriented to an experience of silence which results from repeating the mantra and developing one’s capacity for meditation. Main describes three stages

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<sup>2</sup>John Main, *Word into Silence* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981; reprint, New York: Continuum, 2003), [v]. Page references are to the reprint edition.

<sup>3</sup>When specifically discussing Christian Meditation, I use the word “mantra” as this is the term John Main himself often uses in his writing.

<sup>4</sup>John Main, *The Way of Unknowing: Expanding Spiritual Horizons through Meditation* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 1.

through which one progresses as she develops the capacity to meditate. In each of these, the repetition of the mantra is of primary importance. But they also reveal an increasing capacity for silence on the part of the meditator. This occurs through the reduction of distracting thoughts and an increasing attention being given to the repetition of the mantra. Main explains, “as you persevere in saying the mantra, the distractions do become less and less of a reality . . . the first three aims that you have when you begin to meditate are these: first of all, just to say the mantra for the full period of your meditation . . . The second goal is to say your mantra and be perfectly calm in the face of all distractions that come. And the third preliminary aim is to say the mantra for the full time of your meditation with no distractions.”<sup>5</sup> The progression through these stages thus involves an ability to simultaneously listen to the sound of the mantra and experience an ever-increasing silence which is the absence of other thoughts in one’s meditation.

Although Main emphasizes that repetition of the mantra is the central component of meditation, he also claims that this can result in an experience in which the meditator transcends even the mantra itself and is left with only silence. As he writes, “The day will come when the mantra ceases to sound and we are lost in the eternal silence of God . . . The clear rule is that as soon as we consciously realize that we are in this state of profound silence and begin to reflect about it we must gently and quietly return to our mantra.”<sup>6</sup> Main thus describes an experience in which alternating currents of sound—in the form of the mantra—and silence—in those moments when the mantra ceases—coexist. While silence beyond even the mantra is the experiential goal of meditation, the mantra continues to be fundamentally significant because the meditator returns to its repetition once this silence ends.

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<sup>5</sup>John Main, *Christian Meditation: The Gethsemani Talks* (n.p.: Medio Media, 1999), 45.

<sup>6</sup>John Main, *Moment of Christ: The Path of Meditation* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1984; reprint, New York: Continuum, 1998), xi. Page references are to the reprint edition.

If the manner in which the mantra is used in Christian Meditation involves both sound and silence, the word that is used as the mantra in this practice also suggests their inter-relationship. Main recommends using the word *maranatha* (an Aramaic phrase meaning “Come Lord”) as the mantra for this practice.<sup>7</sup> He writes that this word is found in Christian scriptures and early prayer texts and “has been hallowed over the centuries by our Christian tradition.”<sup>8</sup> Main thus attaches a significance to the particular verbal formula he recommends because of its meaning and previous use in Christian tradition. At the same time, he suggests that *maranatha* is effective as a mantra because its meaning remains somewhat veiled to practitioners of meditation. He writes of the mantra, “I prefer the Aramaic form because it has no associations for most of us and it helps us into a meditation that will be quite free of all images.”<sup>9</sup> Thus the mantra as Main describes it both has and does not have meaning. The sound arising from the language of the mantra is important precisely because it keeps the mantra’s meaning from being foregrounded. The sound of the mantra, then, contributes to an experience of silence, in the sense of preventing reflective thought through the repetition of a phrase which has no obvious discursive meaning.

### **Centering Prayer**

At about the same time John Main was giving instruction in Christian Meditation, a group of Trappist monks in the United States began to teach a similar but distinct meditative practice which eventually became known as Centering Prayer. The teacher with whom Centering Prayer is now most often associated is Thomas Keating, and it is his work which I will use to discuss this practice. Keating summarizes the Centering Prayer method with these instructions:

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<sup>7</sup>Main, *Word into Silence*, 11.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

“1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God’s presence and action within. 2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly, and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God’s presence and action within. 3. When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.”<sup>10</sup> The Centering Prayer method thus utilizes a verbal formula which is repeated during the period of meditation. Keating refers to this verbal formula as the “sacred word.”<sup>11</sup>

The method of Centering Prayer suggests that an inter-relationship between sound and silence occurs in this practice. This is apparent in the way the sacred word is used in meditation. Keating teaches that one should “introduce [the sacred word] on the level of your imagination. Do not form it with your lips or vocal chords. Let it be a single word of one or two syllables with which you feel at ease. Gently place it in your awareness each time you recognize you are thinking about some other thought.”<sup>12</sup> Thus the use of the sacred word is related to silence in two ways. First, Keating emphasizes that the sacred word is repeated silently rather than audibly. Second, the meditator employs the sacred word when she notices that she has given attention to other thoughts. The sacred word, then, is silently verbalized in order to bring about an experience of silence which is the transcendence of thought.

This emphasis upon silence culminates in an experience in which the sacred word itself ceases for a time to have any place in meditation. As Keating explains, “You may reach a point where you no longer think of the sacred word at all. When you sit down for prayer, your whole psyche gathers itself together and melts into God. Interior silence *is* the sacred word at its

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<sup>10</sup>Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel* (Warwick, N.Y.: Amity House, 1986; reprint, Rockport, Mass.: Element, 1992), 139. Page references are to the reprint edition.

<sup>11</sup>When specifically discussing Centering Prayer, I use the phrase “sacred word” as this is the term Thomas Keating himself uses in his writing.

<sup>12</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 36.

deepest level . . . use the sacred word to move into interior silence. So long as you experience the undifferentiated, general, and loving presence of God beyond any thought, don't go back to the sacred word."<sup>13</sup> Again, we see here an interplay between sound and silence, wherein the use of the sacred word facilitates an experience of silence which surpasses all sound, even that of the sacred word itself.

Apart from the manner in which it is employed in Centering Prayer, the sacred word itself displays qualities of both sound and silence. This becomes particularly clear if the categories of sound and silence are related to the issue of the sacred word's meaning or lack thereof. Keating explicitly rejects the idea that the sacred word should have some intellectual or emotional significance for the meditator. Such qualities would simply become distractions with which the meditator would have to contend during meditation. He writes, "The meaning of the sacred word or its resonances should not be pursued. It is better to choose a word that does not stir up other associations in your mind or cause you to consider its particular emotional qualities . . . The less the word means to you, the better off you are."<sup>14</sup> In the continuum that runs between sound and silence, then, the sacred word seems to fall rather definitively to the side of silence, as reflection upon its meaning has no place in meditation. Rather, the meditator uses the word in pursuit of an experience in which attention is not given to thoughts or feelings.

We may note, however, that the particular word one uses for Centering Prayer does have some significance attached to it. This is especially revealed in the examples of sacred words Keating provides, which include "God, Jesus, Spirit, Abba, amen, peace silence, open, glory, love, presence, trust, etc."<sup>15</sup> From within the context of Christian tradition, it isn't difficult to

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 49.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 43, n. 1.

understand why such words would hold significance for the person undertaking the practice of Centering Prayer. If the meaning of the sacred word was entirely unimportant, we could ask if other words such as “monkey,” “bathroom,” or “pepperoni pizza” would serve equally well (maybe not the last one as it exceeds the recommendation of a one or two syllable word). That they would not suggests that the meaning of the sacred word does have some significance as compared with arbitrarily selected words. Nevertheless, the meditator is instructed not to reflect upon the sacred word’s meaning; this would give rise to a sound which takes the form of distracting thoughts. In Centering Prayer, the purpose of the sacred word is to move one into silence.

### **Differences between Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer**

While there is obviously a great deal of similarity between the methods of Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer, there are also two key differences in the way they utilize the quasi-mantra. Briefly considering these differences will help explain how the quasi-mantra is understood to function in each of these traditions. The first distinction is rather practical and concerns the manner in which the quasi-mantra is repeated during meditation. In Christian Meditation, the practitioner is instructed to repeat the mantra continuously throughout the time of meditation. John Main writes that “in our tradition there is the basic teaching that you must say the word from the beginning to the end of the meditation period.”<sup>16</sup> In Centering Prayer, the practitioner is instructed to repeat the sacred word only when she becomes aware that she has given attention to other thoughts. As Thomas Keating explains, “In this practice, you only return to the sacred word when you notice you are thinking some other thought.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Main, *Way of Unknowing*, 55.

<sup>17</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 48.

This distinction between continual and intermittent repetition of the quasi-mantra is directly related to the second difference between these two practices, this being a more theoretical understanding of the way the quasi-mantra functions. In *Christian Meditation*, the mantra serves as a focusing device, with which the meditator attempts to forestall the arising of other thoughts. As Main writes, the mantra “is the way *par excellence* to handle distractions because the purpose of the one word is simply to bring your mind to peace, silence and concentration . . . And the mantra, serving this end, is like a plough that goes through your mind pushing everything else aside.”<sup>18</sup> This explanation of the mantra’s function underscores the importance of its continual repetition, as giving attention to the mantra provides the means with which to overcome other thoughts during meditation. In *Centering Prayer*, the sacred word serves as a symbol of the meditator’s interior disposition rather than as a focal point for concentration. Keating writes that the sacred word works “not by attacking the thoughts directly but by reaffirming your intention to consent to God’s presence and action within. This renewal of the will’s consent, as it becomes habitual, creates an atmosphere in which you can more easily disregard the inevitable flow of thoughts.”<sup>19</sup> For Keating, this understanding of the sacred word as a symbol of intention provides the rationale for his instruction that it only be repeated intermittently. As he writes, the sacred word “only expresses our intention, the choice of our will to open and surrender to God’s presence . . . That is why we do not have to repeat the sacred word continuously. We only use it to maintain our intention of faith and love toward God.”<sup>20</sup>

One way of conceptualizing these different understandings of the quasi-mantra is in terms of its functioning as either a negator of cognitive material in the meditator’s consciousness or as

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<sup>18</sup>Main, *Christian Meditation*, 45.

<sup>19</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 36.

<sup>20</sup>Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 66-67.

a positive symbol of the meditator's will. In Christian Meditation, the quasi-mantra acts as a negator of other thoughts through the meditator's sole and continuous focus upon the repetition of the mantra. In Centering Prayer, the quasi-mantra functions instead as a positive symbol of the meditator's intent to be present to the Divine. This intent is periodically reaffirmed in the face of distractions. Despite these differences, however, there is a fundamental similarity in the method of Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer. In both of these practices, the quasi-mantra is used to respond to thoughts which arise during meditation. Thus in both practices, the quasi-mantra functions as a verbal formula which allows the meditator to transcend sound in the form of thought and thereby directs the meditator to an experience of silence.

### **Interpretations Based on Indo-Tibetan Mantras**

Although the subject of this paper is quasi-mantric prayer in Christian mystical practices, we may note that some parallels exist between their use and that of mantras in Indo-Tibetan religious traditions. A note of caution must of course be sounded here, as I will not attempt to draw a detailed comparison between the use of mantras in Hindu or Buddhist traditions and these Christian practices. My goal is more modest; I intend simply to ask how knowledge about mantras lends some insight into how these Christian quasi-mantras may be understood.

The first point of comparison concerns the purpose for which a mantra is employed. Agehananda Bharati explains that mantras are used in the Indian and Tibetan contexts to accomplish one of three aims. These are "propitiation, acquisition, and identification, or introjection."<sup>21</sup> Bharati describes the third of these, identification or introjection, as the use of a mantra for the purpose of identifying the practitioner who employs the mantra with the

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<sup>21</sup>Agehananda Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition* (n.p.: Rider & Co., 1965; reprint, New York: Samuel Weiser, 1975), 111. Page references are to the reprint edition.

Absolute.<sup>22</sup> This is very similar to the function quasi-mantras serve in Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer. In both of these practices, prayer utilizing a quasi-mantra is oriented to the practitioner realizing a state of union or identity of the self and the Divine. John Main explains that in Christian Meditation the goal is to achieve a degree of self-transcendence such that one is able to identify with Christ. He writes, “We are summoned to see with the eyes of Christ and to love with the heart of Christ, and to respond to this summons we must pass beyond egoism. In practical terms this means learning to be so still and silent that we cease thinking about ourselves . . . The mantra is simply a means of turning our attention beyond ourselves—a way of unhooking us from our own thoughts and concerns.”<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Thomas Keating suggests that Centering Prayer culminates in an awareness of one’s union with God. He writes that “the sacred word points us beyond our psychic awareness to our Source, the Trinity dwelling in our inmost being . . . The purpose of this prayer is to get in touch with the activity that God is constantly initiating in our inmost center.”<sup>24</sup> According to Bharati’s categories of the purposes of mantras, in both Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer the quasi-mantra is employed in the interest of manifesting an awareness of the identity of the self of the practitioner and the Divine.

The second parallel between Indo-Tibetan mantras and these Christian practices concerns the relative importance attached to sound in a mantra’s verbalization. Andre Padoux writes that, in Indian tradition, “in spite of the superiority of the spoken word, the highest and most efficacious form of that word was not the loudest or the most intense but, on the contrary, the most silent and subtle—the inner utterance, the purely mental one . . . this civilization, in fact,

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 112-13.

<sup>23</sup>Main, *Moment of Christ*, xi.

<sup>24</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 46.

has placed at the acme of speech, at the heart of every utterance, not sound but silence.”<sup>25</sup> This description bears great resemblance to the way quasi-mantras are employed in Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer, in that these practices teach a silent, as opposed to auditory, repetition of the verbal formula during meditation. Thus the use of the quasi-mantra corresponds to Padoux’s claim that silence is the ultimate expression of mantric language.

### **Conclusion**

There are four ways in which quasi-mantric prayer in the modern Christian mystical practices of Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer is oriented to silence. First, in both practices the quasi-mantra is repeated silently rather than audibly during meditation. Second, in both practices the quasi-mantra provides a counterpoint to and means to transcend other thoughts which are a distraction in meditation. Thus the quasi-mantra moves the practitioner toward a silence beyond thought which is the locus for an experience of Divine union. Third, in both practices it is suggested that the experience of silence may become so complete that the quasi-mantra itself is surpassed. Finally, in both practices the word chosen as a quasi-mantra has meaning from the standpoint of Christian tradition, yet the intellectual and emotional significance of the word is not reflected upon. Rather, the word is used as a means to move beyond thought. In both Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer, then, quasi-mantric prayer is ultimately oriented to silence, both in terms of the manner in which the quasi-mantra is employed during meditation, and in the mystical experience which is the end of these practices.

This emphasis upon silence, however, should not obscure the important point that in both Christian Meditation and Centering Prayer the way to silent mystical experience is through a

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<sup>25</sup>Andre Padoux, “Mantras—What Are They?,” in *Understanding Mantras*, ed. Harvey P. Alper (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 297.

meditative exercise which utilizes sound and language. Why is it, then, that sound is the way to silence in these practices? Thomas Keating suggests something of an answer, tentative as it may be, when he writes that “spiritual disciplines, both East and West, are based on the hypothesis that there is something that we can do to enter upon the journey to divine union once we have been touched by the realization that such a state exists.”<sup>26</sup> The use of the quasi-mantra in these modern Christian mystical practices provides the “something that we can do” as a part of the mystical way. In these practices, sound in the form of quasi-mantric prayer provides the means with which to approach a mystical experience which is itself, paradoxically, silent.

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<sup>26</sup>Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 34.