

Silence

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Words” to teach, eventually transcribed. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” proclaims John’s Gospel.

Central to most religious faith is “Word,” scribed and scripted into scripture, spoken in proclamation and preaching. And the Word becomes ... endless words.

What has this done to religion, to faith, to the human community? We seem to have lost the original silence—the quiet experience of people breathing together waiting, expecting, wondering what may come next, if anything; hoping to be surprised.

So much of religious practice has become the expected. Is anyone surprised in a church, a synagogue, a mosque? Don’t we know, can’t we guess, what will probably happen, what will be said, what will come next? An hour filled with words, but what is said, what is heard? Is there silence? Would that be sufficient or satisfying? Is silence the “service” we actually long for?

For many, “The Word” is not in the flesh, not incarnate in living, breathing people. “The Word” has become One Person, One Book, One Faith. “The Word” has become only, finally, words.

Yet, what if God, the divine, the sacred (Nature?) is best found when words are dropped, discarded as distractions from whatever we seek in religion, faith or the search for truth? We put up a wall of words when what we

truly need is that “audible silence” Thoreau describes. Silence is not a barrier or wall; silence is the opening. As the great mystics of history teach, there are some things, some experiences, beyond the telling. It can’t be theologized or proselytized.

In a famous speech attributed to Chief Si’ahl (Seattle) he says: “Your religion was written on tables of stone ... our religion is the traditions of our ancestors ... written in the hearts of our people.” The First People, with their belief in the sacredness of everything, cannot be lost under the feet of the Religion of Words—they live on in the land, in “the rocks that lie dumb as they swelter in the sun along the silent seashore ... [When] the streets of your cities and villages shall be silent” the generations who came before will be present—silently present.

When I’ve sat with Buddhist friend or walked on a path in a practice of Buddhist meditation, it’s all about breathing, awareness—this step, this breath this moment, this place—it’s all good. Was Moses doing this on the mountain Muhammad in the cave, Jesus in the desert?

Before words defined and confine the direct experience of (Great Beauty?), what was there? Was it Silence?

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.