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# Beyond Words: The Remystification of the Divine through Dance, Silence and Theopoetics

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**BEYOND WORDS: THE REMYSTIFICATION OF THE DIVINE THROUGH  
DANCE, SILENCE, AND THEOPOETICS**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
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I dedicate this work to Nathaniel, may he now find the peace he so deeply longed for.

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Praying

It doesn't have to be  
the blue iris, it could be  
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few  
small stones; just  
pay attention, then patch  
  
a few words together and don't try  
to make them elaborate, this isn't  
a contest but the doorway  
  
into thanks, and a silence in which  
another voice may speak.

*Thirst*

Mary Oliver

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## INTRODUCTION

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This thesis is about experience. In particular, it is a search into the depths of mystical and meaningful practices that assist in bringing about religious experience. This work completes a journey into the field of Religious Studies as an inquiry, founded on the belief that the study itself can speak to the meaningful nature of religious practice in the lives of many individuals.

In the years leading up to this work, I have found myself immersed in experiential learning that has taken my interest in spirituality beyond the classroom. For a number of years, I have explored Buddhist meditation through workshops, and last year I traveled to Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh's Buddhist community, Plum Village, in France. During my first year in college, I participated in a teacher-training program for Kundalini Yoga, a Sikh practice originating in Northern India. This training prompted an independent study regarding Eastern spiritual texts. Additionally, I have found dance to be an essential vehicle for deepening my spiritual life. Throughout high school, I apprenticed with a teacher trained in Osho's techniques of ecstatic dance and movement as a full release into one's own spiritual process. I have inherited an equally important spiritual tradition from my family. The Quaker tradition of silent worship that I grew up with has given me new perspectives into the Buddhist meditation that I learned in my teenage years. Silent worship and dance have provided me with an experience of the deep power and grace possible within spiritual practice.

A primary interest of mine as a scholar of religious studies has been to place my lived experience of what is *beyond* the known – what one might call an

experience of God – within an academic framework. It is my belief that if a field such as religious studies cannot make room for dialog between lived experience and theology, it has lost some of its power.

The locus of this project centers in a critique of language. This critique seeks to bring experience and theology into this dialog. My work originates both in an assertion that language in general fails to fully encapsulate one's complete experience of the divine and that certain linguistic choices in Classical Christian theology have further limited mainstream Christianity's expression of God. Thus, this piece seeks to examine solutions to the problematic nature of language's interaction with religious experience.

It is with great humility that I pose challenging questions about how mainstream Christianity has used language, what its impacts are on an individual's experience of the divine and what alternatives might be available to the Classical Christian model.<sup>1</sup>

## **THE PROBLEM**

Historically, theology has belonged to the realm of the metaphysical. Aligned with modern models of thought established during the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, theology has strived to establish that which is ultimately "true" of life and God. Even today, mainstream Christian language attempts to describe in an authoritative and definitive way an ultimate reality, which is God. Written and

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<sup>1</sup> A Word about Language: Despite the fact that this thesis challenges language, it must name God in words throughout the piece. Because of this, language describing the Divine will remain intentionally inconsistent both in word choice, gender pronouns and in uses of capitalization.

spoken language become the central mode through which mainstream Christian congregations communicate their clarity about God. In the Christian faith, these written statements acknowledging the fixed beliefs about the ultimate nature of God are known as creeds. Creeds are familiar to most Christians as essential to their confession of faith. This approach speaks to many individuals and communities. It represents well those who see God as immutable and unchanging.

But this understanding of God does not work for everyone. In particular, this vision of God does not work for those who experience God as constantly emerging along with Its creation. Specific creedal religious language and dogma, from this perspective, cannot adequately describe that which always changes. Nor does the attachment to creeds permit the belief that an experience of God is accessible to all people. Rather than coming from a text or through a religious figure, direct religious experience comes from within each individual. The experience of the divine found within does not conform to the practices and rituals associated with creeds. This experience of God is often referred to as numinous consciousness. Rudolf Otto's description from *The Idea of the Holy* is apt. According to Otto:

If a man does not *feel* what the numinous is, when he reads the sixth chapter of Isaiah, then no "preaching, singing, telling," in Luther's phrase, can avail him. Little of it can usually be noticed in theory or dogma, or even in exhortation, unless it is actually *heard*. Indeed no element in religion needs so much as the *viva vox*, transmission by living fellowship and the inspiration of personal contact. But the mere word, even when it comes straight from the living voice, is powerless without the "spirit of the heart" of the hearer to

move him to apprehension. And this spirit, this inborn capacity to receive and understand, is the essential thing.<sup>2</sup>

Otto makes clear that words alone are totally inadequate without an individual's capacity and readiness to hear and feel, that is, to experience from within the meaning of those words.

### **THE LIMITS OF EXCLUSIVE OR LITERALIZED METAPHORS**

Perhaps one of the greatest shortcomings of Western theology has been its tendency to use exclusive metaphors or to literalize them. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their book *The Metaphors We Live By* argue that a human's conceptual system is metaphorical in nature, understanding most keenly concepts and experiences that enable the emergence of meaning. Because our conceptual system is central to developing an understanding of even the most basic elements of daily life, "the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor."<sup>3</sup> Lakoff and Johnson's work speaks to the pervasiveness of metaphor that might be surprising to those who have previously not given metaphor much thought. Their critique requires an inspection of metaphor that reveals its presence not just in our use of language but also in our thoughts and actions. We are, they argue, "fundamentally metaphorical in nature."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) 61.

<sup>3</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *The Metaphors we Live by* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 3.

<sup>4</sup> Lakoff and Johnson 3.

Mainstream Christian writings, however, offer little room for a truly metaphorical understanding of ourselves and the world. The exclusive use of recurring metaphors for God often leads to their literalization. According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphorical concepts are meant to offer merely a partial understanding of the idea they represent. They insist that the “metaphorical structuring involved here is partial, not total. If it were total, one concept would actually *be* the other.”<sup>5</sup> How then should one understand Christian metaphors representing God as “the father” or “king”? Religious metaphors, such as these, are historically marked by their context. A God described as a ruler and king emerged from a period in which kings held “divine right” and monarchic rule was taken for granted (Johnson 20).<sup>6</sup> Classical Christian metaphors thus become inadequate when literal interpretations align themselves with hierarchies that our modern world seeks to move away from. In her book *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, theologian Elizabeth Johnson contests the exclusive use of male metaphors in Classical Christian thought as one that reinforces unequal gender and socio-economic roles by alluding to the completeness of the metaphor used. Classical theism’s representation of “the absolute transcendence of God over the world, God’s untouchability by human history and suffering, and the all-pervasiveness of God’s dominating power to which human beings owe submission and awe” is deeply problematic for a society

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<sup>5</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *The Metaphors we Live by* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1992) 20.

ostensibly seeking justice and equality for all.<sup>7</sup> This “metaphorical” God, which has come to be viewed as exclusively male, stands in solidarity with patriarchy and delineates the bounds of domination and subservience.

Literal interpretations of God as male and of the Apocalypse as the end of life on earth serve as two key examples of the detrimental effects of reading the metaphorical as literal. Literal rhetoric of the apocalypse sullies our history through the prompting of bloody and unrelenting crusades. Catherine Keller, in her book *On the Mystery*, examines both historical and current literal interpretations of Christian texts. Keller notes that the bloodshed of the crusades is not supported by messianic eschatology, in which there is no literal “end of the world.” Instead it “announces the ‘last days’ of the status quo ... a mission to the ‘ends of the earth’ (Acts 1), but this does not propose the last days of creation.”<sup>8</sup> For Christians, it is crucial to acknowledge that the violent and exclusionary results of reading passages such as these literally has created many an atheist and enemy of the faith. This reality is lamentable because, in Keller’s opinion, the original texts themselves leave open a space for interpretation that literalist interpretations ignore. She argues that when “biblical quotes [are] ripped out of context, its literalism – even when couched as ‘Christian fiction’ – kills the spirit of the text.”<sup>9</sup> A literal reading of God as male may have a similar effect on women and men seeking gender equality. As explored above,

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<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1992) 21.

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008) 165.

<sup>9</sup> Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008) 114.

what may have started as a metaphor to stand in for an inexpressible God, is now articulated in a quite literal way. Literal language is inherently exclusionary and stagnates dialog in contexts where language might otherwise lead towards greater openness through the inclusion of lived experience.

It is at this point in our analysis that the findings of Lakoff and Johnson regarding metaphor become truly significant. If, in fact, humans live through metaphor, then the presentation of God as both male and as ruler have serious consequences. This metaphor is neither “abstract in content nor neutral in its effect[.] [S]peaking about God sums up, unifies, and expresses a faith community’s sense of ultimate mystery, their world view and expectation of order devolving from this.”<sup>10</sup> Continuing with the example of exclusive, literal and patriarchal speech about God reveals that classical metaphors have failed both humans and God him/herself. These metaphors have failed humans by reinforcing and legitimating the superiority of one gender over another by excluding female language from God talk. They have also failed God by presenting an image of the Divine as strictly male. Johnson argues that through male imagery, “the symbol [of God] loses its religious significance and ability to point to ultimate truth.”<sup>11</sup> Oppressive and idolatrous, an isolated, single set of metaphors used to represent an unknowable entity obscures divine mystery.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1992) 4.

<sup>11</sup> Johnson 36.

<sup>12</sup> Johnson 18.

Despite these challenges, metaphors continue to be central to the Christian tradition. Many believe these metaphors have had dramatic and generally negative effects on Judeo-Christian cultures, dimming the mysterious and creative aspects of God while reinforcing oppressive societal practices.

### **STERILE TRUTH**

A second limitation of the language used by Classical theism is the exclusion of experience in search of “truth”. “Truth” within classical religious thought has been, in large part, modeled on philosophical and scientific works that seek to “prove” an absolute and objective truth. Objective truth and an understanding of human experience have a limited relationship. Classical theism that dictates an exclusive truth has had, and continues to have, its critics within the Christian community whose members do not all resonate with dogma or creed. This attachment to “truth” may be detrimental, as is the case with a uniquely masculine metaphor of God. Stanley Romaine Hopper in the introduction to *Interpretation: The Poetry of Meaning* speaks to the unbalanced nature of Western classical thought with respect to truth. He argues that the belief that “truth is at our disposal: we stand over against it, confer value upon it and manipulate it technically” is a scientific and philosophic perspective emerging from the advent of humans’ ability to manipulate the earth.<sup>13</sup> This position is bolstered by a quite literal interpretation of the Genesis passage: “God said, ... ‘let

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<sup>13</sup> Stanley Romaine Hopper, "Introduction" *Interpretation: The Poetry of Meaning* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc, 1967) xiii.

them have dominion ... over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth' (Genesis 1:26)."<sup>14</sup>

Determining a set of qualities or truths about what God *is* severely limits our ability to access God's mystery and powerful emergence in life. According to Theodore Roszak in *Where the Wasteland Ends*, the result of this stubborn focus on obtaining one absolute truth is that empiricism becomes "*empericide*, the murder of experience."<sup>15</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg supports this claim in his essay "Toward a Theology of the History of Religions" arguing that when religions lose their "power to interpret convincingly the full range of present experience in the light of their idea of God," they will ultimately fail.<sup>16</sup> An attachment to dictating what is true of God manifests itself in language that prefers absolute knowing over the preservation of the mystery of God. Hopper draws a parallel between the fixation of religious language and the crucifixion of Christ arguing that "whenever 'meaning' is not disclosed, whenever clichés of everydayness or abstraction fixate words ... The Cross occurs."<sup>17</sup> Theorists who bring this to our attention call for a theology that addresses our current condition and preserves the vastness of God. A Christianity that seeks to prove a set of unchanging truths about God negates its own ability to make meaning by excluding lived experience.

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<sup>14</sup> Stanley Romaine Hopper, "Introduction" *Interpretation: The Poetry of Meaning* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc, 1967) xiii.

<sup>15</sup> Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends* (Doubleday: Garden City, 1972) 280.

<sup>16</sup> Pannenberg Wolfhart, "Toward a Theology of the History of Religions" *Basic Questions of Theology: Collected Essays Vol 2*. (Louisville: George Kehm, 1983).

<sup>17</sup> Hopper *Interpretation* xix.

**“FLATTENED” LANGUAGE**

As I have shown, the language of Classical theism has implications in people’s lives, both spiritually and practically. Religious language is faced with the impossible task of placing the ineffable into words. At its best, meeting this challenge results in the inspiration of awe and a deep personal engagement with Spirit. At its worst, the words describing God become meaningless, dull, and repetitive.

Traditional theistic creeds and the beliefs they encourage cannot be separated from the ways in which they are put into practice. Matt Guynn, author of “Theopoetics and Social Change” argues that “language has gone flat in our religious traditions. We use language again and again without examining and refreshing it.”<sup>18</sup> It makes sense that the repetition of phrases and acts that appear exclusionary and rigid could easily stagnate. Formulas developed in mainstream religious language cannot adequately express religious experience as it relates to a mysterious God. They illustrate the liabilities of using religious language, language that cannot convincingly explain how God can be both loving and omnipotent in the face of life’s suffering. A God who must be known by certain predetermined truths through creeds leaves limited space for faith to engage with personal experience. When language becomes fixed, rigid and “rote ... and religious conversation become routinized ... we tread the path of habit.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Matt Guynn, "Theopoetics and Social Change" (*Cross Currents* 60.1, 2010) 1.

<sup>19</sup> Matt Guynn 1.

It is clear by now that the current framework of Classical Christian theology has created linguistic habits that limit many people's ability to tap into the awesome vastness that results from experiencing God. Because classical religious language has become fixed and fails to mirror the lived experience of people, thereby limiting our experience of the mystery of God, it is essential to reevaluate the means by which Spirit is articulated and accessed. This thesis is an exploration of those who have committed to a fresh and awakened experience of the Christian tradition that will continue to speak to the human condition.

## **ALTERNATIVES**

Dissenting theologies within Christianity have emerged to speak out against essentialist and exclusive manifestations of Christian faith that attempt to elevate a single truth as a means to relate to God. In essence, these dissenters announce that our metaphors for God are dead, that our descriptions of Spirit are over-simplified and stagnant. They argue that classical theist language becomes inadequate when faced with the task of expressing an experience of God. In different eras, individuals and communities have resisted these fixed representations of God, developing teachings with a powerful impact on spiritual practice in daily life. Dissenting theologians have utilized the tools of their trade to express and experience God in forms that defy fixed language.

The dissenters examined in this work emerged in distinct time periods and under different social and political eras. The Quakers began practicing in the 17<sup>th</sup> century at a time of great religious turmoil. Cultural creatives, such as Isadora

Duncan, began their alternative practices at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, responding to a new understanding of humanity's relationship to nature. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, a group of process theologians, who felt limited by theological language, developed Theopoetics to break out of classical modes of writing. All three exit the realm of descriptive language. Quakers do so by listening to the small voice within, through corporate silence. Duncan attempts this through the embodiment of Spirit in dance. Theopoets seek to discover novel metaphors to challenge old ways of viewing the world.

These individuals and groups who object to Classical Christian theology assert that language limits the expression of God within the tradition. Defining God in this way is actually seen to interfere with an effort to experience the Divine. They argue that unlike an individual's feelings and experiences, language and dogma remain static. While the use of words may change with time, the depth and evolution of an experience cannot be found within a single word and often, even strings of words remain inadequate. Equally, meanings of words are not universal. Both "God" and "love" are terms that are understood differently by different people and their meaning may change for an individual over time. Religious language has failed to adequately represent religious experience through its use of exclusive and literalized metaphors, its desire to make truths about God universal and through the repetitive usage of words and phrases. In one form or another, these dissenters conclude that, language that pretends to be complete and comprehensive in describing the experience of the divine fails. It imposes a false unity on an experience that escapes coherent organizing. Thus, language must be viewed as a broken and insufficient tool. Only

when understood in this way can one attempt to use language anew in the search for religious meaning.

## THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD THROUGH QUAKER SILENCE

Classical theism of 17<sup>th</sup>-century England fiercely guarded a hierarchy in which the ordinary worshipper was barred from God by ritual, ordinance and sacrament. Geoffrey Hoyland, in “The Use of Silence”, argues that the church required a

preparation of mind with which the would-be communicant must equip himself before he approaches the inner sanctuary; he must saturate himself with the words and phrases of orthodox Christian experience so that, in effect, he may hear the right things and the right things only. The Church has been apt to tell the rank-and-file not only how he must approach God, through what gateways and in what mental costume, but even what God will say to him in the interview.<sup>20</sup>

The Religious Society of Friends (commonly referred to as the Quakers) emerged at this time, along with many other religious sects, in response to the control that Orthodoxy claimed over the religious experience of the everyday Christian. Friends developed an experiential spiritual practice based on their belief in the ability of laypeople to access the potency and power of God for themselves.

The Religious Society of Friends took shape under the leadership of George Fox (1624-1691). Fox and his fellow “seekers” rejected several foundational elements of the Church of England, beginning with the notion that the layperson needed a priest to interpret God for him or her. The presence of a priest and formal

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<sup>20</sup> Geoffrey Hoyland, *The Use of Silence* (Wallingford: Pendle Hill Pamphlet Print) 15.

ritual distracted from what they believed was essentially an inward experience. Quaker worship took place outside of the church, initially in peoples' homes. As it was not dependent upon the presence of a priest, worship could be and was conducted during and outside of the church defined times of worship, with no one appointed to guide the worship or offer communion. Second, responsibility for worship was shared equally among Friends, men and women, reflecting both their belief in direct experience and a counter cultural belief in unity of worshippers which they did not find in the established church. Finally, the practice they created was stripped of the otherwise obligatory formal prayers, sermons, recitation of creeds and hymns. Richard Bauman, author of *Let Your Words Be Few*, suggests that a fundamental tenet of Quakerism -- "that their belief and practice should be inspired and validated by direct revelation from God speaking within" -- underlies this new form of worship.<sup>21</sup> Quakers' simple practice of silent worship replaces the need for ministers and priests, creeds, confession and communion. Pink Dandelion, in *The Liturgies of Quakerism* explains:

For [early] Friends, this was founded in an intimacy with God involving unmediated access and a sense of being set free from sin. It was expressed in and through silent worship, a silence of curtailment and a silence of new possibility in clear distinction to anachronistic liturgical forms that focused on earlier modes of relationship with God and Christ. Speaking was only to bring

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Bauman, *Let Your Words be Few: Symbolism of Speaking and Silence among Seventeenth-Century Quakers* (New York: Cambridge University, 1983) 15.

people into silence, to quake in expectation, and to allow the Word to be heard through the passive vessel of the obedient servant.<sup>22</sup>

Their practice replaced an emphasis on ritual and creed with silence. Silent worship asked Quakers to find an authentic and pure space of contact with God from within.

### **QUAKER CONCERNS REGARDING LANGUAGE AND CREEDS**

The turning of Friends to silence as the source of their connection with God springs from a detailed understanding of the dangers of language within both religion and daily life. Rex Ambler, in his essay “Creeds and the Search for Unity” explains that firstly, and most importantly, for Quakers, written statements “detract from the primary, inward experience they are meant to articulate by giving emphasis to an outward form.”<sup>23</sup> Fox’s interpretation of the limitation of the Church centered on their use of words. In “Words, Wordlessness, and the *Word*: Silence Reconsidered from a Literary Point of View,” Peter Bien explains that Fox’s critique goes beyond even the Church to an inherent fallacy in words themselves. Words, Fox believed, were inauthentic compared to the “unified, enduring, unfragmented Reason or Light or Life or Word that John says not only ‘was with God’ but ‘was God.’”<sup>24</sup> God is whole, while words fragment. Thus words, for the Quaker, can never fully achieve the goal of describing God. Rex Ambler, in his essay *The End of Words: Issues in*

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<sup>22</sup> Pink Dandelion, *The Liturgies of Quakerism* (Ashgate: Antony Rowe Ltd, 2005) 33.

<sup>23</sup> Rex Ambler, "Creeds and the Search for Unity: A Quaker View" (London: Quaker Books, 2004)

<sup>24</sup> Peter Bien, *Words, Wordlessness and the Word* (Wallingford: Pendle Hill Publications, 1992) 18.

*Contemporary Quaker Theology* further explains that creeds can stagnate our spiritual development through an attachment to the means of articulating a religious truth.<sup>25</sup> In this way, written doctrine can deter a continual questioning and expanding of one's faith. As the London Yearly Meeting reported in 1917 in their Faith and Order Commission, while attempts to intellectually express the Divine through language are understandable, "it should always be recognized that all such attempts are provisional, and can never be assumed to possess the finality of ultimate truth. There must always be room for development and progress, and Christian thought and inquiry should never be fettered by theory."<sup>26</sup>

Essential to Quakers' rejection of the written word is their understanding that words, when spoken, participate in the life they are expressing. Once removed from their original contexts, words take on a life of their own – a life which may not have any relation to their original meaning. Written words can crystallize beliefs on issues that will "always be beyond any embodiment in human language."<sup>27</sup> Quakers thus are careful to allow language to emerge from silence, recognizing that it must be allowed to die back into silence without recording it for all of time.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Rex Ambler, "The End of Words: Issues in Contemporary Quaker Theology" (London: Quaker Books, 2004) 20.

<sup>26</sup> Quaker Faith and Practice: The Book of Christian Discipline in the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 1995).

<sup>27</sup> Quaker Faith and Practice: The Book of Christian Discipline in the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 1995).

<sup>28</sup> Despite this wariness of the written word, Quakers do not reject the Bible; rather they attempt to utilize it as a source for further connecting with the Living Silence. Early Quaker Isaac Pennington directs us to "learn of the Lord to make a right use of the Scriptures: which is by esteeming them in their right place and prizing that above them which is above them."

Quakers also call into question the appropriateness of creeds and the written word based on their power to obscure the unity among the human community as an expression of God's presence. Amongst the Christian community, it is notable how divided members of one faith can become from each other because of varying beliefs or practices. The attempt to articulate perfectly and define once and for all "true" doctrine leads to deep rifts amongst Christians. Quakers propose silent worship as one means through which members of the Christian faith can find common ground. Hoyland points to the irony of this division and the possibilities for reconciliation through silence reminding us that for all the attempts at fellowship that

have been conducted on the level of thought, speech, and action; as soon as men open their mouths, however full their hearts may be of charity, the things that divide come forth equally with those that unite. Is it not possible that in the Living Silence lies the one perfect road to reunion? For on those deep levels of the spirit there are no differences; priest and layman, ritualist and Quaker, male and female are indistinguishable when they are all alike held within the embrace of God.<sup>29</sup>

The language used in Christian doctrine is equally damaging to non-Christians.

Formulated statements can close doors to "sincere and seeking souls who would gladly enter it."<sup>30</sup>

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Thus for many Friends, Scriptures become an equal partner or companion to the person listening to the Living Silence.

<sup>29</sup> Geoffrey Hoyland, *The Use of Silence* (Wallingford: Pendle Hill Pamphlet Print) 23-24.

<sup>30</sup> *Quaker Faith and Practice: The Book of Christian Discipline in the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 1995).

## SILENCE AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Rather than merely removing written word from their tradition, Quakers have replaced that space with the spiritual practice of silence. The Living Silence, as it is called by Friends, powerfully engages the individual and is seen, not as a practice that must negate all other practices, but instead, as one that purifies and deepens them.

Seventeenth-century Quakers, not unlike Quakers today, lived in a culture in which silence was perceived merely as the absence of the spoken word, or as a break between utterances.<sup>31</sup> Dorothee Soëlle, however, distinguishes the Quaker silence from other forms of silence. She views the conventional experience of quiet as a “dull, listless apathetic silence, a wordlessness arriving from poverty, such as exists in cultures of poverty or between two people who have nothing to say to one another.”<sup>32</sup> This silence reflects a disengagement from both the self and the outer world, a sort of numbing out. Soëlle identifies Quaker silent worship as distinct, as a “post discourse” silence pregnant with an abundance inexpressible through language.<sup>33</sup> Neither is this silence describable in words, nor is it easy. Quakers acknowledge that silent waiting upon God is challenging and provocative for our inner state. The active element in this seemingly passive process is a critical ingredient in the opening of oneself to

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<sup>31</sup> Richard Bauman, *Let Your Words be Few: Symbolism of Speaking and Silence among Seventeenth-Century Quakers* (New York: Cambridge University, 1983) 11.

<sup>32</sup> Dorothy Soëlle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001) 70-71.

<sup>33</sup> Soëlle 70-71.

communicate with God.<sup>34</sup> The ultimate reward of this practice is a personal communion with the Divine in which God's will is discerned through silent listening.

The practice of silent meeting for worship is intended to facilitate a quieting of the mind. Through continual practice, outward "noise soon ceases to be a hindrance to the Living Silence; it is not the clatter of a tram-car or the swaying of a crowded bus that interferes so much as the clatter of our thoughts and the swaying of our insatiable desires."<sup>35</sup> Thus, silence becomes an ascetic practice of fasting from words, while simultaneously enabling the practitioner to become an embodied expression of "the living light."<sup>36</sup>

The power of silence for Quakers lies in the relationship it develops between God and worshipper. For practitioners believing in a creative power greater than themselves, silent worship becomes a space for the self or the ego to step aside, allowing for a pure connection with the Divine. Quakers call this process "waiting upon God." Silence creates a calm emptiness into which a Divine voice may speak unfettered. Quaker journals describe an "unhurried waiting in the presence of the Divine Listener, ... waiting until the surface mind has been stilled and the deeper levels of our being are drawn out."<sup>37</sup> Through "becoming silent so that a voice other

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<sup>34</sup> V. V. Jensen, "Communicative Functions of Silence." (*ETC* 30, 1973).

<sup>35</sup> Geoffrey Hoyland, *The Use of Silence* (Wallingford: Pendle Hill Pamphlet Print) 14.

<sup>36</sup> Dorothy Soëlle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001) 74.

<sup>37</sup> Douglas V. Steere, *Where Words Come From* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1955) 52.

than one's own can be heard," "truths" about the Divine are neither restricted to the clergy and biblical texts nor is there an acceptance of fixed ideas about God.<sup>38</sup>

While Quakers have been among the most insistent on the role of silence in creating a space for God to enter in, they are not alone in their convictions. The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber observed that "when we are quiet to the Lord, he makes his dwelling with us; we say Lord, Lord, and we have lost him."<sup>39</sup> Merely in saying God's name, we limit God's vastness and immediacy. The 16<sup>th</sup>-century Catholic priest John of the Cross described the importance of silence in another way: "The Father uttered one Word: that Word is His Son, and He utters Him for ever in everlasting silence; and in silence the soul has to hear it."<sup>40</sup> Silent worship invites an experience of God that is direct and relevant to the present moment. In Christian language, it creates a deep space of waiting within the soul for Christ to enter. In like manner, the Christian mystic Hildegard of Bingen spoke of finding the Living Light through silence in this way: "I sometimes and not often see another light which is called for me the living light, and when and in what manner I see this, I do not know how to say. And when I gaze on it, all sadness and all need are snatched away from me, so that then I have the manner of a little girl and not of an old woman."<sup>41</sup> In her descent into something Divine and through her withdrawal from language, Hildegard

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<sup>38</sup> Dorothy Soëlle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001) 170.

<sup>39</sup> Martin Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) 7.

<sup>40</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1945) 216.

<sup>41</sup> Hildegard of Bingen in Martin Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) 44.

experiences a transformation of self. Her description of God makes clear that her experience of the Divine reflected and responded to her personal circumstances. As an older woman, Hildegard feels God's presence to her as a "living light" that rejuvenates and enlivens her soul. In this way, God must be experienced inwardly because no outward description can pretend to speak to the mode in which each individual will access and connect with God. Similarly, even within one person's life, the Quakers insist that the experience of the Divine (and the Living Silence) will change over time. Returning to silence is one form of resisting an eventual stagnation that results from cycles of repetition – whether they be through word or rite. Ambler states that in expressing and experiencing one's own faith, as well as a community's, over time, "diversity and change, and even the contradiction, are included."<sup>42</sup> The experience of God, accessed through silent worship, is neither dictated by the Quaker community nor by one's own past experience.

How is it, then, that Quakers defend their lived experience of the Divine? Much like the modalities described in subsequent chapters, Quakers affirm that human beings hold within themselves the capacity to find life's meaning and fulfill it.<sup>43</sup> This meaning is found in and through a connection with the mysterious and ineffable source of life. Quakers affirm that a connection with this source evolves through a careful awareness of our feelings and intuitions that dwell below a surface of words. Thus the discipline of silence provides access to the underlying truth of the

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<sup>42</sup> Rex Ambler, "Creeds and the Search for Unity: A Quaker View" (London: Quaker Books, 2004) 42.

<sup>43</sup> Rex Ambler, "The End of Words: Issues in Contemporary Quaker Theology" (London: Quaker Books, 2004) 50.

self and, by extension, to one piece of the truth of the Divine.<sup>44</sup> For Quakers, looking within affords the most immediate access to God available. In Christian terms, dying and rising with Christ must occur in our own being, through our own experience. The potential for both suffering and renewal can be found in each individual. Said another way, the presence of Christ is already within us.<sup>45</sup> The Quaker commitment to living in stillness and silence aligns itself with an even deeper commitment to responding to and living in integrity with the inner light and voice of God that emerges from this practice. The challenge of active silent listening gives birth to the struggle to respond authentically to the inner light or voice that speaks during silent worship. Silence, as a means of deeply connecting with God, beckons a lifestyle in constant listening to what in one's life truly reflects the divine pulse beating within all of us.

Quakers argue that silent worship offers a direct experience of the Divine that cannot be replaced by written creed or ritual. Quakers do not deny, however, the possibility of using multiple forms of practice to access God. They believe, however, that silence is a crucial element. Hoyland clarifies that

Communion with God in the Living Silence is not a substitute for “active” prayer and meditation, rather it is their crown. All three, and a deal of hard, clear thinking in addition, are necessary if the Christian is to achieve a balanced spiritual life. But as, through long discipline, the way into the Silence becomes easier and more habitual the Christian finds that these other

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<sup>44</sup> Rex Ambler, “The End of Words: Issues in Contemporary Quaker Theology” (London: Quaker Books, 2004) 50.

<sup>45</sup> Rex Ambler, “The End of Words” 31.

activities are constantly leading him up to the inner gateway through which he may plunge, in an instant, into the arms of God.<sup>46</sup>

Silence, therefore, becomes a glistening invitation to live in the realm of God at all times. Finding stillness provides immediate access to God, while written word and ritual are merely supports.

### **THE INWARD GOD**

Quaker faith, rooted in a foundational belief in human capacity for direct communion with God, is radical amongst Christian traditions. At its core, this experience of the divine “cannot ultimately be described in words, but Quakers base their whole lives on it.”<sup>47</sup> It is through a lived experience of God, through the practice of silence, that Quakers build their faith. In silent worship, the presence of the Divine is *felt*, leading each practitioner to give authority to it. Equally, in silence, God’s will is discerned, validating the fact that an individual can experience the Divine in silence.<sup>48</sup> Accessing God through silent worship requires an adjustment in the form in which God is invoked. Silent practice must move beyond a one-way relationship in which prayers and requests are made upon God. Instead, stillness relates to God’s eternal ‘beingness’ with the sense that God is everywhere and within us and that our openness to the Infinite is just as important as the Infinite’s willingness to be open to us. “It can only spring from a deep and overwhelming conviction that *God is there*, in

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<sup>46</sup> Geoffrey Hoyland, *The Use of Silence* (Wallingford: Pendle Hill Pamphlet Print) 14.

<sup>47</sup> "The Quaker Way" (1989).

<sup>48</sup> Pink Dandelion, *The Liturgies of Quakerism* (Ashgate: Antony Rowe Ltd, 2005) 96-97.

the profound depths below consciousness and that we must go there together to meet Him.”<sup>49</sup> The Living God dwells within all individuals and finds expression therefore in varying ways. Quakerism asserts that, given the Bible as a tool and the Living Silence as a primal means of accessing God, each individual has the capacity to receive religious truth for oneself.

### **THE FOUNDATION FOR UNITY: THE GATHERED MEETING**

Worship in the Living Silence is not a substitute for prayer and meditation. For Quakers, it is their “crown.”<sup>50</sup> In its essence, silent worship, unlike prayer and meditation, is not an individual activity. Instead of attending a church with rituals like communion and guidance from a minister, Quakers’ *communal* worship takes the form of a gathered “Meeting for Worship.” The traditions of a Quaker meeting remain relatively unchanged from the original form as it emerged in the 1650s. Dandelion describes this worship in detail:

Seats are arranged in a circle or square, usually in an unadorned room. Participants come into the room silently and sit where they wish. Worship usually lasts an hour. The whole time may be silent or it may be that some present share “vocal ministry” with the rest of the group. Typically, there are three or four ministries in the hour, each lasting three or four minutes. The end of worship is signaled by the shaking of hands, initiated by one of two “Elders”, the only pre-arranged outward gesture of the whole rite. This form

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<sup>49</sup> Geoffrey Hoyland, *The Use of Silence* (Wallingford: Pendle Hill Pamphlet Print) 22-23.

<sup>50</sup> Hoyland 14.

of Quaker worship can take place anywhere and at any time and follows no liturgical calendar, for all times and places are deemed equally sacramental. There are no pre-arranged sermons or music, no collective vocal prayer, no altar, no vestments, no celebrants, or separated priesthood, nobody to lead or mediate the worship, no outward communion. Outwardly, it is bare, a minimalist service.<sup>51</sup>

Just as Quaker silence is an active and engaged one, so too the practice of discerning God's will through silence involves careful and earnest intention on the part of the individual joining in worship. Silence serves as the medium through which a group seeks to determine God's will. Hoyland explains that once worshippers have gathered and "settled,"

each offers himself or herself to God in uttermost self-abandonment, opening to Him the innermost gateways of their being as in private devotion. The communal worship thus begins, as all worship must begin, with an individual act of self-giving. The *whole* self is offered, sins and all, and then self drops out of sight and out of mind in the overwhelming sense of the reality and goodness of God as the worshippers, individually, lay themselves open to His will. And then, as the sense of God begins to dominate the meeting to the exclusion of all earthly thoughts and needs, a new experience comes to the group. As the Living Silence lays hold of them individually they become conscious that they are no longer so many separate entities, they have become fused together in a unity which it is quite impossible to express in words.

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<sup>51</sup> Pink Dandelion, *The Liturgies of Quakerism* (Ashgate: Antony Rowe Ltd, 2005) 1.

They ... become *one* soul, not a dozen or more separate souls, because they have entered into God and He has made them one. And this blessed unity involves no loss of personality, rather they are conscious that their individual personalities have been heightened and made more vividly alive because of their fusion with one another in God.<sup>52</sup>

Hoyland's description makes clear the significance of gathering with others for worship rather than practicing alone. On a subtle level, it is understood that "under the influence of the Spirit" members give and receive to one another both with and without using words.<sup>53</sup> The presence of the group heightens each individual's ability to release their own agenda and release into a quiet listening to God. The gathered practitioners unify and strengthen one another, easing the business of the mind and drawing each individual soul into a sense of the collective.<sup>54</sup> Quakers understand the meeting of an individual with God as a personal experience in which one's capacity for both suffering and renewal (mirrored by the suffering and renewal of Christ) are met by God in the act of silent worship. Quakers see the role of the communal presence as helping to make sense of the numinous experience while offering constant presence and companionship in moments in which "there are no apparent

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<sup>52</sup> Geoffrey Hoyland, *The Use of Silence* (Wallingford: Pendle Hill Pamphlet Print) 19-20.

<sup>53</sup> *Quaker Faith and Practice: The Book of Christian Discipline in the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 1995) 2.11.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Bien, *Words, Wordlessness and the Word* (Wallingford: Pendle Hill Publications, 1992) 19.

traces of the One who will be *where* she will be.”<sup>55</sup> Gathered meeting thus becomes one form of confronting that task together, “as a community, [screening out] everything that might distract us. What we hope for, and wait for, is the experience of immediacy.”<sup>56</sup> For Bauman, “silence, and especially the silent communion of worshippers, is the most desirable spiritual state for the conduct of collective worship.”<sup>57</sup>

### VOCAL MINISTRY

Worship in the Living Silence and the individual and collective discernment of God’s will ultimately, and paradoxically, lead to speech. Distinctive to the words used in Quaker meeting for worship is their spontaneous nature. No words are predetermined through a creed or sermon; rather the words live in the meeting and are born out of silence. Speech during meeting emerges out of the inward silence of the speaker and, when shared, is meant to deepen the silence of the others’ worship.<sup>58</sup> Thus, silence is “both the antecedent to speaking in worship and the end of speaking

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<sup>55</sup> D. L. Johns, "Ritual Management of Presence and Absence: The Liturgical Significance of Silence" (*Quaker Religious Thought* 28.4, 1998) 36.

<sup>56</sup> Rex Ambler, “The End of Words: Issues in Contemporary Quaker Theology” (London: Quaker Books, 2004) 31.

<sup>57</sup> Richard Bauman, *Let Your Words be Few: Symbolism of Speaking and Silence among Seventeenth-Century Quakers* (New York: Cambridge University, 1983) 125.

<sup>58</sup> Bauman 125.

in worship; silence precedes speaking, is the ground of speaking, and is the consequence of speaking.”<sup>59</sup> When shared in this way, vocal ministries

in no way interfere with the perfection of the silence, they will rise to the surface like bubbles on a still pond, leaving but a momentary ripple on the surface; if they truly grow out of silence they will be part of it and will but serve to express the unity and blessedness which are the experience of all alike.<sup>60</sup>

Words are not seen as distinct and separate from silence because they emerge out of the silence and speak to it. Ministry that speaks from a place of inner silence is likely to facilitate the collective worship. Within a context in which all words spoken reflect “an inward clarification in which the ministering worshipper was indeed given an insight” from God to be shared, those words, which spontaneously emerge from the Source of Life, are infused with a vibrancy and power that words spoken throughout the normal course of the day are not.<sup>61</sup>

Paradoxical though it may seem, silence is not meant to eliminate all speech. As humans, our reality includes the use of words and for Christians in particular, there is a belief in a divine Word. Words, though they may be inauthentic and divisive, dwell within all people. For Quakers, any individual who has the power of words has the power to access words from silence – from a light and divinity that dwells within themselves. Thus the challenge of gathered Meeting for Worship

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<sup>59</sup> Richard Bauman, *Let Your Words be Few: Symbolism of Speaking and Silence among Seventeenth-Century Quakers* (New York: Cambridge University, 1983) 31.

<sup>60</sup> Geoffrey Hoyland, *The Use of Silence* (Wallingford: Pendle Hill Pamphlet Print) 20-21.

<sup>61</sup> Douglas V. Steere, *Where Words Come From* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1955) 53.

involves the attempt to express in words the immediate experience of the Divine within each individual what is, in fact, wordless.<sup>62</sup> Quakers understand this to be possible through the principle of careful listening to the God. Steere explains the entire process of worship as a “listening” practice:

Here the living God has listened this organ of the gathered meeting into a condition of openness. The meeting has been listened into a readiness to receive. It has been listened into a corporate drawing toward the loving One whose presence can reconcile all enmity, melt all hatred, and kindle into active love every power that seems to resist it.<sup>63</sup>

It is from this state of collective listening that anyone who speaks must speak. Quakers have a responsibility to themselves to remain active and engaged in their own silence along with a responsibility to listen deeply, both externally and internally, for the benefit of the whole meeting. Even in silence, a rhetorical transaction takes place in that the presence of God and God’s guidance is a response to the deep listening of the gathered group. Thus the act of sharing vocal ministry is not exclusively determined by the speaker. Lippard, in “The Rhetoric of Silence” explains that “the listener’s attunement to a spiritual center becomes the means by which the minister is able to speak, and the guideline for forming the speech is the preservation of that common attunement. Source and receiver merge in a truly

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<sup>62</sup> Peter Bien, *Words, Wordlessness and the Word* (Wallingford: Pendle Hill Publications, 1992) 23.

<sup>63</sup> Douglas V. Steere, *Where Words Come From* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1955) 51.

participatory rhetoric.”<sup>64</sup> For Quakers, the most authentic and prophetic of ministries are listening ministries.<sup>65</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Quaker ministry places silent worship at its center while not neglecting the powerful nature of words. In this way, Quakers do not shrink from their assertion that language, and in particular the written word, can set interpretations and symbolic representations of God in stone and distract individuals from their own personal experience of God. Quaker ministry is meant to respond to the “pulses of the divine whisper” that bring one’s inner self to clarity in such a way that God’s purpose, as clarified in that moment, can be offered humbly to the meeting as a whole.<sup>66</sup>

The Quaker practice of Meeting for Worship is a collective joining in silent openness to receive the guidance of God that Quakers believe is available to every individual who chooses to listen to the “still small voice within.” Quakerism’s origin in the 17<sup>th</sup> century responded to rote rituals and creeds that drew the attention of the religious individual towards the form of religion over a direct experience of the Divine itself. In particular, the Quaker religion took a stand against the written word that crystallized contingent explanations of God into timeless understandings that limited the concept of God and excluded those unwilling to accept the Christianity defined by creed. From these conclusions, Quakers developed a silent practice which

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<sup>64</sup> P. V. Lippard, "The Rhetoric of Silence: The Society of Friends Unprogrammed Meeting for Worship" (*Communication Quarterly* 36.2, 1988) 152.

<sup>65</sup> Douglas V. Steere, *Where Words Come From* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1955) 50.

<sup>66</sup> Steere 53.

required intentionality and engaged presence. Beyond the reading of scripture and the guidance of learned religious leaders, silence offers the potential for direct communion with God. A personal experience of the Divine is both transformational and ever changing.

Through an engagement with the human paradox that expression through words is necessary and yet incapable of revealing the wholeness and depth of God, Quakers engage in a form of ministry that emerges from the Living Silence. Truths shared in this way are understood to be slivers of the Divine channeled through members of the meeting to bring even clearer illumination to all who sit in communion with the Divine. Quaker practice seeks to invoke language whose ultimate source is the Living Silence.

Reflective of the historical context within which it began, Quakerism roots itself in sober contemplation. While Quakerism offers both a belief in each person's capacity to connect with God and a means through which to do it, it cannot be said that silence should be the exclusive form through which to access the Divine.

Quakerism is one of the few Christian traditions in which all people are welcome to gather and practice because it makes no requirement of members to confirm their beliefs by way of creeds or doctrine. Each member of the Quaker faith is thought, irrespective of gender, race or class, to have equal access to the word of God through silence. Quakerism moves away from a focus on repentance and sin towards an alignment with the God within and actions appropriate to that alignment. Through a commitment to stillness, Quakers embody a presence in which God may be more fully experienced. Presence and deep listening challenge Quakers to develop

lifestyles outside of their gathered meeting that reflect a commitment to action and an authenticity found within their silent communion with the Divine.

## DANCE AS RELIGION: RELIGION AS AN EXPRESSION OF LIFE

In the early 17<sup>th</sup>-century, the Quakers focused on stilling the body and the mind to create the possibility of experiencing a holy presence. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, American dance innovators found that stilling the mind while *engaging* the body could invite an equally powerful experience of unity, a connection with the divine. They opposed certain theological and philosophical tenets that viewed the body as unworthy and beneath “true” religious experience. These choreographers and dancers objected to the removal of the senses in religious dialog and to the exclusive focus on language and thought. These dancers aligned themselves with what would become the Modern dance movement.

Dance innovators and creators emerged independently in the United States and Europe. Influenced by similar cultural trends and changing attitudes towards religious practice, they developed a remarkably common vision. Dancers such as Ruth St. Denis (1876-1968), Rudolf Laban (1879-1958) and Isadora Duncan (1877-1927) redefined Western dance as a medium through which spirit expressed itself.

Essential to the work of these innovators was an understanding that movement powerfully expresses something universal. John Hodgson, in *Mastering Movement*, describes Rudolf Laban’s belief that movement unifies existence, arguing that “Once it has been seen that movement runs through every aspect of living reality, it is not a great step to realize that movement brings together and binds experience making it one.”<sup>67</sup> Laban takes this analysis a step further, determining that if movement is found

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<sup>67</sup> John Hodgson, *Mastering Movement: The Life and Work of Rudolf Laban* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 171.

in all of life, then movement and existence are one and cannot exist without each other. Common to these innovators was the notion that movement can and should be “a confirmation and an affirmation of life. When we move we are part of the living universe.”<sup>68</sup> Ruth St. Denis links movement to the Divine even more explicitly, through the creation of the Church of the Divine Dance.<sup>69</sup> While developing their techniques and philosophies separately, St. Denis, Laban and Duncan all address the disconnect they perceived in the Christian church between the body and the soul, the individual and God - a disconnect they sought to harmonize through a fully *embodied* religious experience.

Though each of these leaders has documented extensively their views on dance as related to religion and spirituality, here I seek to make explicit a vision of dance as religious experience which was articulated most clearly by Isadora Duncan. More so than her counterparts, Duncan developed an engaged philosophy which Kimerer L. LaMothe, in *Nietzsche's Dancers: Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and the Revaluation of Christian Values* has gone so far as to call a “theopraxis.”<sup>70</sup> LaMothe describes Duncan’s philosophy as an embodied theology, in which movements aligned with her philosophy place “dance itself as the locus of our god-

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<sup>68</sup> John Hodgson, *Mastering Movement: The Life and Work of Rudolf Laban* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 172.

<sup>69</sup> Neil Douglas-Klotz, "Ruth St. Denis: Sacred Dance Explorations in America" (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 113.

<sup>70</sup> Kimerer L. LaMothe, *Nietzsche's Dancers: Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and the Revaluation of Christian Values* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 109.

forming instinct.”<sup>71</sup> LaMothe further explains that dance, in Duncan’s theopraxis, is “an activity in which people image, elevate, and sanctify their highest ideals ... *Dance enacts the potential of life to create beyond itself.*”<sup>72</sup> The intention of this chapter, through the use of Duncan’s theopraxis, is to shed light on the relationship between dance and the direct experience of the divine.

### SEEKING AN AFFIRMATION OF LIFE

Raised as a Catholic, Duncan witnessed her mother’s disenchantment with the church when she was forced to divorce Isadora’s father. As a result of her mother’s bitter rift with Catholicism, she reports that “[f]rom my earliest childhood I have always felt a great antipathy for anything connected with churches or Church dogma.”<sup>73</sup> Despite this, Duncan framed her involvement in dance as a religious endeavor. Unlike her mother, who became a follower of the atheist Robert Ingersoll, Duncan believed that she, herself had direct and personal experiences of divinity through her body. This revelation put her in opposition to the prevailing attitudes toward the body in Christian practice. Reflecting upon her upbringing she suggests “the land of America had fashioned me as it does most of its youth, -- a Puritan, a mystic, a striver after the heroic expression rather than any sensual expression

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<sup>71</sup> Kimerer L. LaMothe, *Nietzsche's Dancers: Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and the Reevaluation of Christian Values* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 125.

<sup>72</sup> LaMothe 109.

<sup>73</sup> Isadora Duncan, *My Life* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1927) 277.

whatever."<sup>74</sup> She felt keenly the legacy of American protestant attitudes toward the body and described herself as a "product of American Puritanism."<sup>75</sup>

Rather than simply dismissing the Church's rejection of the body and the senses as a spiritual gateway, Duncan sought to transform these attitudes. She sought to demonstrate the validity of the senses, instincts and the body in one's relationship to God.<sup>76</sup>

Duncan, in particular, speaks out against "Christian teachings and practices that encourage hostility toward dance, human bodies, or the bodies of women."<sup>77</sup> Just as men are associated throughout history with the mind, women have been identified with the body. Confronting destructive images of both women and bodies as "less-than" and replacing them with a faith in one's own body is an essential purpose of Duncan's dance. Dance holds the power to alter the way women "conceive of themselves, conduct themselves, and relate to their bodily selves."<sup>78</sup> At the point at which both women and men are able to listen to and feel the natural movements of their own bodies, spirit emerges. Duncan offers a vision of the future in which these two elements, the body and the soul have grown harmoniously together, such that the language of the divine self speaks from both.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Isadora Duncan, *My Life* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1927) 78.

<sup>75</sup> Duncan 78.

<sup>76</sup> Kimerer L. LaMothe, *Nietzsche's Dancers: Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and the Revaluation of Christian Values* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 111.

<sup>77</sup> LaMothe 111.

<sup>78</sup> LaMothe 144.

<sup>79</sup> Isadora Duncan, *The Art of the Dance* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1928) 62.

The purpose of art and religion, viewed through the eyes of Isadora Duncan, is the affirmation of life. Both art and religion serve to facilitate what Duncan found to be the clearest illustration of this affirmation: the emergence of the soul through an unmediated connection with a divine force. Though all art may facilitate this unfolding, Duncan understood dance, through its inherent embodiment, as “the foundation of a complete conception of life, more free, more harmonious, more natural.”<sup>80</sup> Duncan redefined dance as more than a mechanical and arbitrary compilation of steps born out of predetermined techniques. For her, dance found meaning and purpose in its ability to let the human soul shine forth.

### CONTEMPORARY INFLUENCES

Contrary to established Christian notions that describe God as “otherworldly,” Duncan grounds her sense of the divine in the physical reality of life. She particularly values Nature as a source of wisdom and potency that equal a spiritual force in the world. Ann Daly, author of *Done Into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America* points to the German naturalist and early Darwin supporter Haeckel as an influence on Duncan’s conception of religion and dance as ‘natural’. Daly describe how Haeckel replaced

anthropist dogmas and the duality of orthodox religions with a comprehensive view of the universe. Monism, he asserted, “recognizes one sole substance in the universe, which is at once ‘God and nature’; body and spirit (or matter and energy) it holds to be inseparable.” The monist position led to a religious

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<sup>80</sup> Duncan, *The Art of the Dance* 101.

pantheism, which replaced a creationist God with the natural forces of evolution. Thus man is not separated from God/“Nature”; rather, man is enmeshed in the divinity of “Nature,” which *is* God.<sup>81</sup>

Duncan embraced the language of the divine *as* nature and by extension, access to the divine was possible through physical engagement. Thus, authentic choreography must involve the inclusion of “a little of that divine continuity which gives to all of Nature its beauty and life.”<sup>82</sup>

Creating works at the turn of the century, Duncan’s fascination with Greece reflected both an American interest in Greece as a source of inspiration and a personal rejection of certain elements of modernity. Duncan’s view that art in the industrial world is viewed merely as merchandise deepens her interest in Grecian expression. She asserts that “the dance of the future will have to become again a high religious art as it was with the Greeks.”<sup>83</sup> Duncan perceives Greece as an ideal through which dance can renew Christianity.<sup>84</sup> Her trips to Greece and numerous museums to study vases and statues inform her movement, as she gradually developed the concept of the “undulating line.” The undulating line, as she saw it in Greek art, is a posture that

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<sup>81</sup> Ann Daly, *Done into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995) 99.

<sup>82</sup> Isadora Duncan, *The Art of the Dance* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1928) 102-103.

<sup>83</sup> Duncan 61.

<sup>84</sup> Kimerer L. LaMothe, *Nietzsche's Dancers: Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and the Revaluation of Christian Values* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 113.

holds within it the power to naturally give birth to a subsequent movement which creates a deeper connection with the divine.<sup>85</sup>

This principle on which Duncan founds her movement also responds to her dismay at the disjointed relationship between the “modern” or industrial world and nature. A disregard for the natural world and a disconnection from the body seem integrally connected. Duncan laments that, from her understanding, at the moment in which humans became conscious, they lost their connection to their natural movements. Thus her quest in dancing is to consciously reconnect humanity with what has been unconsciously lost.<sup>86</sup>

### **RECLAIMING THE BODY**

Duncan saw the body as the first and foundational entry point for our experience of the life affirming spirit of the divine. Daly describes the potency Duncan placed in the body as

the prime reality, the template of life, the source of all knowledge. The body was inseparable from the mind; when she talked about the body, she was talking also about the soul, about the “self.” The ‘Truth’ of the body as she constructed it lay in its depth and in its harmony with “Nature.”<sup>87</sup>

The transformation that Duncan longs to see within the Christian tradition requires a shift in our perception of the body. In order for the body to gain the respect

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<sup>85</sup> Isadora Duncan, *The Art of the Dance* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1928) 91.

<sup>86</sup> Duncan 78.

<sup>87</sup> Ann Daly *Done into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995) 4.

it deserves, Duncan sees that it must *itself* become the instrument through which the divine is received and expressed. The individual develops faith in her own body and its voice. As the body becomes viewed as the instrument of the divine, the mind and the senses learn to listen, to wait and to trust their kinetic responses.<sup>88</sup> Ultimately, the individual's relationship to the body is transformed such that dance becomes an expression of "love for the body ... as a source of insight and value, of art and religion."<sup>89</sup> Duncan redefines dance and religion such that the body becomes the locus of the presence of God on earth. By placing direct experience squarely in the realm of religion *through* embodiment, Duncan is introducing a notion that would have been quite controversial in her era. LaMothe suggests that Duncan calls for the evolution of Christian values along the trajectory of commitment to what she shares with them, a love of life. She can envision life-affirming values because she knows in her own lived experience how life-negating values function, how they train our senses in ways that encourage ignorance of the body and of dance, and why they do not deliver the salvation they promise.<sup>90</sup>

Duncan describes her vision as the same "dream that resounded through the words of Christ" when she seeks the creation of our highest ideals through the *embodiment* of them.<sup>91</sup> The divine, closely linked with artistic expression, is the

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<sup>88</sup> Kimerer L. LaMothe, *Nietzsche's Dancers: Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and the Revaluation of Christian Values* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 137.

<sup>89</sup> LaMothe 137.

<sup>90</sup> LaMothe 126.

<sup>91</sup> Isadora Duncan, *My Life* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1927) 359.

spirit-filled movement of life in nature and ourselves. In a compilation of Duncan's writings, entitled *The Art of the Dance*, she attests that "dance is not a diversion but a religion, an expression of life."<sup>92</sup>

Given the centrality of Duncan's vision of the divine, it is perhaps not surprising that her philosophy of religion, expressed through dance, does not manifest through an exclusive alliance with a particular religious tradition or institution.<sup>93</sup> Nonetheless, Duncan sees dance that embodies her principles as an engagement with and revaluation of classical Christian attitudes towards "soul and body, human and God, female and male."<sup>94</sup> Dancing in the spirit of Duncan's philosophy redefines and unfolds who each one of us is. In Quaker terms, this dance lets one's "Inner Light" shine through.

Duncan locates spirit in the body but our access to it depends both on physical and mental engagement. The "human spirit," the source of "divine expression" and the "soul" are linguistic forms of expressing what Duncan found in the solar plexus.<sup>95</sup> Carrie J. Preston, in her article "The Motor in the Soul," stresses the significance for Duncan of finding in the body a visible sign of one's inner spirituality, of the "stirrings of a physicalized soul."<sup>96</sup> Duncan clarifies that the body offers a key into

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<sup>92</sup> Isadora Duncan, *The Art of the Dance* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1928) 142.

<sup>93</sup> Kimerer L. LaMothe, *Nietzsche's Dancers: Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and the Revaluation of Christian Values* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 125.

<sup>94</sup> LaMothe 125.

<sup>95</sup> Carrie J. Preston, "The Motor in the Soul: Isadora Duncan and Modernist Performance" (*Modernism/modernity* 12.2, 2005) 278.

<sup>96</sup> Preston 278.

the soul through mental concentration. This concentration is accomplished through the emptying of the mind into a physical awake-ness and the development of a sensory relationship to one's own unique and inherently wise, bodily being.<sup>97</sup> Dance is a tool that allows and invites access to our ability to connect with something greater than we are. Developing the skills to listen and respond takes practice. LaMothe observes that Duncan's dance form is a response to her concerns regarding Christianity's rigid, doctrinal restraints on the body. Duncan claims that the use of dance as a daily practice transforms the body into an "'instrument' through which persons overcome the lingering effects of Christian morality on their lived experience, and affirm their bodily becoming as a locus of revelation."<sup>98</sup>

## PREPARATION

Duncan theorized and choreographed in conjunction with an emerging generation of dance innovators for whom the body, rather than the mind, was the portal through which a sense of unity with the divine might be achieved. Like Quakers, who sought to still and center themselves to prepare for silent worship, these innovators believed that the individual needed to prepare. Duncan presents the potent results of this preparation, inviting the reader to imagine "a dancer who, after long study, prayer and inspiration, has attained such a degree of understanding that his body is simply the luminous manifestation of his soul."<sup>99</sup> The result of listening to

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<sup>97</sup> Kimerer L. LaMothe, *Nietzsche's Dancers: Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and the Revaluation of Christian Values* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 132.

<sup>98</sup> LaMothe 132.

<sup>99</sup> Isadora Duncan, *The Art of the Dance* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1928) 52.

and trusting the body in dance is heightened fluidity between the body and the soul such that the body/soul entity can stand as a part of the wholeness of divinity.<sup>100</sup>

Duncan elaborates a system of preparation for dancers whose intention is to move from their soul. In the unfolding of this process, she places greatest emphasis on gymnastics and the study of nature. Duncan describes a physical routine that corresponds to what is appropriate for the age and body of the individual. Gymnastics, as defined by Duncan, is meant to make the body a perfect instrument for one's stage in life. Thus the body becomes "an instrument for the expression of that harmony which, permeating everything, is ready to flow into bodies which have been prepared for it."<sup>101</sup> This practice must coincide equally with one's will, such that it can be carried out with grace and good humor. Perhaps most significant in Duncan's application of gymnastics, as a path to preparedness for dance, is the use of it not as means to an end, but as an end in itself. Similar to Duncan's understanding of art, gymnastics is meant to perfect and make each day joyful.

A second essential element to Duncan's preparation is the study of nature. Duncan cites nature as "her first and only teacher, guiding her always toward a body unfettered, undivided, uncorrupted."<sup>102</sup> She observes in nature a continuity of movement found in waves, the wind and the earth. The rhythm of the waves, unique to an ocean or lake, repeats into the future without struggle or effort. What is particular to nature is eternal to nature. Duncan applied the movement of nature to

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<sup>100</sup> Isadora Duncan, *The Art of the Dance* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1928) 51.

<sup>101</sup> Duncan 81.

<sup>102</sup> Ann Daly *Done into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995) 88.

human movement in her theopraxis. She uses nature as an inspiration for the movements she discovers within herself and her description of the rhythms of nature makes clear their implications for humanity. Movements of the clouds in the wind, the waving of trees, the flight of birds, the whirling of leaves, all have a special signification for them. They learn to observe the special quality of each movement. They develop a secret sympathy in their souls, unknown to others, which makes them comprehend these movements as most people cannot. ... How often, returning from these studies, coming to the dance room, have these pupils felt in their bodies an irresistible impulse to dance out one or another movement which they have just observed!<sup>103</sup>

Duncan insists upon the study of nature as a preparation for awakening to the pulse of the soul. She taught her students that when in harmony with nature, the body is in harmony with its own spirit and with the divine.<sup>104</sup>

### **THE DANCE EXPERIENCE**

After having prepared physically and spiritually to engage in the form of dance Duncan describes, the dancer is ready for a deep experience of the Divine through movement. Engaged movement of this kind awakens the soul. Duncan explains her purpose as an instructor, stating “So confident am I that the soul can be awakened, can completely possess the body, that ... I have aimed above all else to bring ... a consciousness of this power within themselves, of their relationship to the

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<sup>103</sup> Isadora Duncan, *The Art of the Dance* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1928) 82.

<sup>104</sup> Duncan 98.

universal rhythm, to evoke from them the ecstasy, the beauty of this realization.”<sup>105</sup>

Dancing expresses the longing of the soul to transform, to widen its range of movement (both physically and metaphorically) beyond its normal patterns. Soul movement, born from the solar plexus and through the undulating line, brings the awareness of the individual to the stifled nature of the movements encouraged by society and the church. Learning from Grecian modes of expression and from nature, the dancer brings to life movements that bring freedom and release to her body.

Duncan’s theopraxis originates from experience. She anchors her work in her own experience of feeling dance take over her body. Duncan describes an early dance experience, accompanied by her mother on the piano, in which she listens to the music without a choreographed design in mind. She reports an impulse arising from her solar plexus and radiating out into her limbs, propelling her into space.<sup>106</sup> Duncan connects the awakening of her soul with the visceral experience of her solar plexus as its “temporal home.”<sup>107</sup> Duncan’s experience necessitates a faith in the body’s natural ability to perceive its unique rhythm, the soul’s immediate manifestation.

Duncan describes three elements as foundational to the experience of dance as unfolding religion. First, dance requires deep concentration. Second, it calls for an exploration of one’s natural movement capacity. Finally, it must be individual and

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<sup>105</sup> Isadora Duncan, *The Art of the Dance* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1928) 52.

<sup>106</sup> Kimerer L. LaMothe, *Nietzsche's Dancers: Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and the Revaluation of Christian Values* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 121.

<sup>107</sup> Isadora Duncan, *My Life* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1927) 341.

unique to the one who experiences it, thus flowing constantly from a source that is authentic and personal.

Just as the silence in a Quaker Meeting for Worship is distinct from the silence of boredom, dance as a manifestation of the divine requiring deep concentration is distinct from social dancing. The mind is emptied. Duncan eschews language here. No prayer or mantra guides the dancer. Through deep concentration, profound listening to the inner-self and to the outer music occurs. What then manifests through the body aligns itself naturally with both the inner-self and the music. Duncan directs this profound concentration, encouraging dancers to “Listen to music with *your soul*. Now, while you are listening, do you not feel an inner self awakening deep within you – that it is by its strength that your head is lifted, that your arms are raised, that you are walking slowly toward the light.”<sup>108</sup> Her reference to music does not require audible music to be present. The *feeling* of the pulse of life can occur in silence without releasing the process of careful listening. Deep concentration plunges “your soul in divine unconscious *Giving* until it gives to your soul its *Secret*... My soul should become one with it, and the dance born from that embrace.”<sup>109</sup> Clearly, Duncan’s relationship to dance finds its focus in the profound and potent locus of her being, found only from within. Depth of concentration both honors and enables an experience of one’s own soul.

Once the mind has centered through deep concentration, the body is then invited to explore and extend to its “natural capacity.” Rudolf Laban, known for

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<sup>108</sup> Isadora Duncan, *The Art of the Dance* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1928) 52.

<sup>109</sup> Duncan 107.

systematizing the range of human movement with incredible precision, understands one's "natural capacity" as the fullest range of movement possible for the individual. For Duncan, this term means following or respecting the natural movements of the body, typified by the undulating line referred to earlier. The undulating line, found elsewhere in nature, manifests in the body as a universal pulse. Duncan reports that the only certain and constant principle in life is the "constant, absolute and universal unity between form and movement."<sup>110</sup>

The expression of the full range of an individual's physical capacity is not Duncan's sole concern. Equally important to her is the spiritual significance of the undulating line. With other Romantics of her time, Duncan holds that a continuing line, such as that of a wave, represents eternal life and the conquest of "death through perpetual rebirth."<sup>111</sup> In this way, her theopraxis calls dancers back to a Christian notion of death and resurrection. Duncan's emphasis on the resurrection is on the *embodied* manifestation of an eternal spirit. Duncan's definition of dance as life-giving blends death with resurrection. Beyond the physical undulating line to which a dancer has access, each life in itself "is a spiritual line, an upward curve. And all that adheres to or strengthens this line is our real life; ... Such a spiritual line is my Art."<sup>112</sup>

The third crucial element in Duncan's theopraxis is that each dancer's form must be individual. Duncan defies conventional ballet training by refusing to develop

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<sup>110</sup> Isadora Duncan, *The Art of the Dance* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1928) 102.

<sup>111</sup> Ann Daly *Done into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995) 34.

<sup>112</sup> Duncan 143.

a formal technique that might force a dancer to adjust her unique style of movement. Using the lens of dance as religion, Duncan's theopraxis is distinctly not creedal and refuses to be formalized. No formula can teach an embodied connection to the Divine. This must come from one's own direct experience.<sup>113</sup> Duncan reports that people's initial fascination with her work often resulted in attempts to imitate it.<sup>114</sup> These dancers failed to grasp Duncan's principles regarding individual expression. If they had, they would have realized that to achieve the potency and beauty they saw in Duncan, they should have found movement within their own bodies that delivered them to that same authenticity and power. In light of this, John Martin, author of "Isadora Duncan and Basic Dance" asserts that within Duncan's school of thought, "no series of set movements, whatever their virtues for muscle development, can be established for training technique."<sup>115</sup> Dance must be discovered, not inherited.

Duncan's dance form invites individual creative engagement. It does not, however, imply that schools of dance are futile. Quite to the contrary, Duncan develops a vision for a dance school modeled off of her philosophy, in which students learn to make their own movements through a familiarity of what is "natural" to them. Predicated on the belief that there are "movements which are the perfect expression of that individual body and that individual soul; ... we must not force it to

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<sup>113</sup> Kimerer L. LaMothe, *Nietzsche's Dancers: Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and the Revaluation of Christian Values* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 119.

<sup>114</sup> Isadora Duncan, *The Art of the Dance* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1928) 52.

<sup>115</sup> John Martin, "Isadora Duncan and Basic Dance." *Isadora Duncan* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1947) 14.

make movements which are not natural to it but which belong to a school.”<sup>116</sup>

Duncan’s theopraxis involves an inquisitiveness that enhances students’ abilities to “sense movement impulses arising within themselves ... to attend to her bodily movements and listen for her own kinetic responses in order to sustain an awakened physical consciousness and exercise the ‘power within.’”<sup>117</sup> Duncan views children as ideal candidates for this kind of dance education because they are not yet habituated to curtailing their unique and spontaneous forms of expression. Within a Christian context, Duncan celebrates that most young children have not yet developed an understanding of religion that pits them against their own bodies. Duncan explains “In childhood we feel the religious sense of movement poignantly, for the mind is not yet clouded with dogmas or creeds. Children give themselves up entirely to the celebration and worship of the unknown God, ‘Whatever gods may be.’ In fact a child can understand many things through the movement of its body which would be impossible for it to comprehend by the medium of the written or spoken word.”<sup>118</sup>

Duncan works with adults to call them back to a voice within their bodies that they may have forgotten, but finds incredible joy teaching children who are still able to feel “an inner self awakening.”<sup>119</sup> The sign of a dancer embodying Duncan’s theopraxis is that her dance is distinct from all others and unique to her.

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<sup>116</sup> Isadora Duncan, *The Art of the Dance* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1928) 61.

<sup>117</sup> Kimerer L. LaMothe, *Nietzsche's Dancers: Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and the Revaluation of Christian Values* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 135.

<sup>118</sup> Duncan 124.

<sup>119</sup> Duncan 129.

Duncan's method is powerful because it draws the dancer's attention inward, into her form and beyond it, to the sense and spirit that prompts it. The absence of a formula requires that a dancer harmonize her movement to her own perfect form. This process projects "a vision of dance as that activity in which a person creates and becomes her highest ideals."<sup>120</sup> Thus, through dance, an individual's relationship with herself radically transforms, becoming alive, vibrant and constantly changing.

### **THE EXPERIENCE OF THE AUDIENCE**

Similar to Quaker silence, which must be accessed by the individual yet is enhanced and deepened through community, dance thrives when in relationship to a viewing audience. This relationship, as described by Duncan, requires an engagement from both parties. From the spectator, Duncan calls for an openness to one's own physical consciousness and kinetic imagination. In order for the relationship to be meaningful to the viewer, however, Duncan also demands a complete awakening of the soul from the dancer.<sup>121</sup> This theopraxis intends for the full engagement of the viewer and the dancer in the experience, creating an inner movement or transformation that enables both to emerge "with the ability to embrace the most harrowing sorrow as a reason to love bodily life."<sup>122</sup> The viewer, through witnessing the dancer's complete embrace of her unique and natural movement, finds a oneness and harmony with the dance, being drawn by the "most noble expression of human

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<sup>120</sup> Kimerer L. LaMothe, *Nietzsche's Dancers: Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and the Revaluation of Christian Values* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 119.

<sup>121</sup> LaMothe 142.

<sup>122</sup> LaMothe 115.

life and the clear call of divinity.”<sup>123</sup> The dance of an awakened soul transmits to the viewer (through the movement of the body) an experience of lightness, of communion and of prayer. LaMothe explores the dynamic relationship that unfolds through the mutual engagement of dancer and viewer, explaining that

when the dancer moves with awakened soul and the spectator actively receives the kinetic images into his sensory field – then what Duncan describes as a “miracle” can happen. A spectator sees *soul*. ... the dance appears as a revelation and a prayer. ... It is to see an ideal of *life* itself as a process of creating – in and through bodily movement – our ideals of beauty and holiness. To those who watch with such expectation, a dancer can appear divine; and the dance can “implant in our lives a harmony that is glowing and pulsing” (Duncan *Art of Dance* 103). A dancer dancing can stir hope in our capacity to bring into being a way of life lived accountable to the practice, choreography, and performance of dance as religion.<sup>124</sup>

Recall that dance as religion, as theopraxis, is an expression of life. Duncan calls for a complete and ecstatic participation that gives her performances a vibrancy and authenticity. Margerita Duncan in her essay “Isadora” describes Duncan’s dancing as “tremendous and universal ... A gesture reaching towards the earth and then lifted

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<sup>123</sup> Isadora Duncan, *The Art of the Dance* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1928) 98.

<sup>124</sup> Kimerer L. LaMothe, *Nietzsche's Dancers: Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and the Revaluation of Christian Values* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 143.

upward ... up into the arms of God.”<sup>125</sup> Duncan’s philosophy views dance as meaningful engagement with the Divine for both the viewer and the dancer.

## CONCLUSION

Isadora Duncan, along with Ruth St. Denis, is credited with being the mother of Modern dance. Margaret Lloyd in *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance* explains Duncan’s profound influence on our world today. “What Walt Whitman is to modern poetry, Isadora Duncan is to modern dance – the first great romanticist, the first apostle of freedom and democracy in her art, the liberator from sterile conventions.”<sup>126</sup> Her innovative work broke away from the dancing of her contemporaries, both ballerinas and Vaudeville dancers, laying the foundation upon which later dancers would develop techniques known today as modern dance. Many elements of Duncan’s revolutionary dancing still remain with us today. Modern dance has made central Duncan’s understanding of the solar plexus as the core of all movement, the space through which something greater than our conscious mind emerges. Similarly, Duncan’s dancing liberated modern dance from the previously obligatory ballet shoes and rigid costumes. Modern dance has continued to prioritize the grappling with, and exploration of, questions of embodiment and engagement for both the dancer and the audience.

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<sup>125</sup> Margarita Duncan, "Isadora" *The Art of the Dance*. (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1969) 21.

<sup>126</sup> Margaret Lloyd, *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance* (New York: Dance Horizons, 1949) 3.

Some elements of Duncan's legacy, however, have not lasted into Modern dance as we know it today. Unlike Quaker's use of silence, in which anyone is welcome to still themselves in worship, dance has not remained a spiritual practice, as Duncan saw it. Even choreographers who adopt Duncan's notions of dance as awakening for the soul find that performing set works, rather than expressing each unique soul, is a requirement for companies to succeed. While Duncan created dancing schools to teach students to identify their unique movement style, Modern dance eventually shifted to a more structured and technique-oriented model. Thus, Modern dance has not ultimately become a tool for spiritual development. It has instead remained in the realm of performing arts.

Despite these changes, Duncan's theopraxis has inspired generations of choreographers who powerfully reclaim the body (and particularly women's bodies) as a vehicle for connecting to the divine and to the unity of life. Duncan revalues movement and dance as a spiritual practice through which she views her body "neither as an obstacle to spiritual growth, nor as an ignorant mass requiring control by an agile mind, but as a dynamic locus of (self) revelation."<sup>127</sup> Revaluing dance revalues the body and revalues God because thinking about and practicing "*dance* as an expression of *soul* ... serves to dislocate and dissolve dualistic perceptions of body and mind, or human and God."<sup>128</sup> Duncan's theopraxis and its critique of classical Christianity empower women through embodiment. Duncan's use of soul language to

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<sup>127</sup> Kimerer L. LaMothe, *Nietzsche's Dancers: Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and the Revaluation of Christian Values* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 132.

<sup>128</sup> LaMothe 132.

describe dance positions it as a “practice for helping people overcome the puritan reduction of the senses at work in Western culture.”<sup>129</sup>

Duncan’s deep care and concern for the liberation of women’s bodies is evident. Her theopraxis seeks to demystify and “defetishize” female sexuality, such that it becomes a part of the *human* condition, free of objectification.<sup>130</sup> For Duncan, spiritual expression and empowerment for women are one and the same. She felt that for “women to dance as an expression of life would be radical: they would renew religion by honoring their own bodily movement as the source of religious ideals, as having value.”<sup>131</sup> Thus, while her theopraxis has liberating capacities for both women and men, women within a Christian context have more to gain through its use.<sup>132</sup>

Duncan’s dance, not unlike Quaker practice, reinforces the belief that each individual has access to a divine source without mediation from church authorities. Her work emphasizes a universal life force that is not divisive. Dance was Duncan’s religion, and it was the gospel that she preached. Through dance, as either dancer or spectator, each soul could partake in divine unity with “Nature.” Each soul could partake in the harmonious “Beauty” that merged self with God through the medium of “Nature.” Thus Duncan

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<sup>129</sup> Kimerer L. LaMothe, *Nietzsche's Dancers: Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and the Revaluation of Christian Values* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 132. 120.

<sup>130</sup> Ann Daly *Done into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995) 170.

<sup>131</sup> LaMothe 118.

<sup>132</sup> LaMothe 144.

endeavored to guide the world back to “Nature,” whose evolutionary process, if we permit it, would deliver us to God.<sup>133</sup>

Duncan’s theopraxis requires complete engagement and a willingness to tap into the universal pulse within oneself. Her method is by no means easy and success is not guaranteed if one cannot release pervasive definitions of both dance and religion in order to embrace something reflective of a person’s unique form. Out of the collective work of innovators led by Duncan has come a new and enduring form of dance and human expression. Duncan’s theopraxis trains the senses in a radical and personal way through which women and men can live their ideals as both holy and embodied.

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<sup>133</sup> Ann Daly *Done into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995) 32.

## THEOPOETICS: LIVING METAPHORS

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“One of the happiest turns in postmodern thought for persons of imagination and faith is the turn from metaphysics to poetry.”<sup>134</sup>

“We need a new language in order to plunge into the cloud of unknowing.”<sup>135</sup>

Quakers consciously abandoned formal linguistic attempts to define God or the experience of the divine. Words were understood as inauthentic and a barrier to one’s communion with God. Duncan is not indifferent to language; rather she responds to the historic and persistent separation of body and soul in Christian theology. She invites a lived experience of the divine through movement where language is entirely unnecessary. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, a number of American theologians initiated a dialogue regarding Christian language. Far from abandoning language, they changed the terms of the debate. No longer interested in claiming a literal interpretation of scripture or defending an ultimate truth about God, they looked to life itself as a source of understanding divinity. Poetic language became the vessel for a deeper linguistic expression of god.

The current limitations of Classical Christian language, and indeed, of language in general, demand, according to the theopoets, an exploration into how to

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<sup>134</sup> Scott Holland, "Theology is a Kind of Writing: The Emergence of Theopoetics" (*Cross Currents* 47.3, 1997) 1.

<sup>135</sup> Dorothy Soëlle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001) 59.

articulate God in words while still inviting in, rather than excluding, mystery. This endeavor requires a radical re-visioning of our conceptual system, a re-drafting, in a sense, of our old metaphors. This work entails unlearning familiar symbols while engaging with new forms of archetypal imagery. Its effects can be widely felt. The use of male imagery in religious language serves as a potent example, revealing that “language about God in female images not only challenges the literal mindedness that has clung to male images in inherited God-talk, it not only questions their dominance in discourse about holy mystery; but insofar as ‘the symbol gives rise to thought,’ such speech calls into question prevailing structures of patriarchy.”<sup>136</sup>

Renewal of language has long been a part of the Christian tradition. Thomas Aquinas openly supported new language in his culminating text *Summa Theologica*, stating: “Nor is such a kind of novelty to be shunned; since it is by no means profane, for it does not lead us astray from the sense of scripture.”<sup>137</sup> This assertion implies that as long as new writings speak to the nature of the “living God mediated through Scripture,” they are useful and even encouraged.<sup>138</sup> The significance of Aquinas’ words is twofold. It lies first in the invitation to use one’s personal experience to express the Spirit of God so long as these experiences resonate with the message of scripture. The call for new language also enables oppressed or previously voiceless people to step away from a Classical and hierarchical model of God while remaining within the Christian tradition. Renewing language while staying true to the intention

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<sup>136</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1992) 5-6.

<sup>137</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, q. 29, a 3

<sup>138</sup> Johnson 7.

of scripture can begin a conversation with those who have previously been underrepresented, and calls for multiple expressions of God that are aligned with people's lived experience.

Before beginning to examine writings that have attempted to redress the critiques of Western religious thought raised throughout this work, it is important to note the significant challenge of expressing the divine through language. Language serves as a mirror of the disjointed nature of human consciousness, unable to grasp divinity consistently. Language participates in the confusion, commotion and multiplicity that is life as we experience it.<sup>139</sup> Martin Buber, in *Ecstatic Confessions*, explains the inherent challenge of articulating in words an experience of the Divine that cannot be seen. He argues that words to describe the experience of God do not exist in ordinary language.<sup>140</sup> Sufi mystic and poet Rumi echoes Buber, envisioning words as dust on the mirror that we call experience.<sup>141</sup> Yet this task of translating a beautiful mirror into the language of "dust" is of ultimate import in a society through which much is expressed through words. The language used to express Spirit gives shape to communities, their values, their understanding of truth, sense of beauty and commitment to service.<sup>142</sup> By virtue of our need for some way to express the Divine through words, it is essential to offer alternatives to linguistic explanations for God that are rigid and static.

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<sup>139</sup> Dorothy Soëlle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001) 59.

<sup>140</sup> Martin Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) 8-9.

<sup>141</sup> Soëlle 55.

<sup>142</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1992) 4.

Modern science shocked the public when physicists announced that the universe, once thought to be infinite and unchanging, was in fact continually expanding and unfolding. In this same way, Western religion is undergoing a radical revisioning of God. Moving away from an original view of God as an unchanging and unmoved external power, Process theologians, amongst others, have begun to engage with language that describes God as unfolding, changing and constantly new. This God is difficult to portray given that language is not ever-changing nor is it all-inclusive. An “almighty” God cannot also be a “tender” God, nor can it be a “creative/creator” God unless explicitly stated to be so. Thus, even as notions of God within theology have become more expansive, inclusive and mysterious, defining God has not gotten easier. F. Thomas Trotter calls for a renewal of language, while acknowledging the complexities within it.

The closer we get to the edges of the mystery of things, the less adequate our explanations become. The word *mystery* has its root in a Greek word that means “to shut one’s mouth.” There is no way we can abandon words in theology, but there may be required of us a new modesty about the meanings of words. That is, what Frye calls “blatant literalism” and “vague transcendentalism” must be replaced by a new sense of the vitality of words and their use in other contexts than propositional arguments. Meaning becomes attached to words.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> F. Thomas Trotter, "Theology and Imagination" *Loving God with One's Mind* (Board of Higher Education and Ministry of the United Methodist Church, 1987) 2.

Like silent worship and dance, Theopoetics engages in a subversion of language. By its very nature however, Theopoetics subverts language by using language, but in a new and radical way.

Accepting that language mirrors humanity, as inherently subjective and incomplete, some theologians elect to focus their theological inquiry within the realm of human's lived experiences of God. Stanley Romaine Hopper's introduction to *Interpretation: The Poetry of Meaning*, calls for an "unveiling or unconcealing" of religious truths that draws on experience, something Hopper understood as "the essential act of man."<sup>144</sup> Theologians writing with this goal in mind must remain true to the spirit of scripture, but, as has been argued above, Christian texts and parables are far from lacking in substance that can be reinterpreted to provide mystery and meaning. New language about God grounds itself in a vision of the Divine as constantly unfolding, opening, and new. The evolving nature of God permits new language to revitalize and renew our relationship to Him/Her. Bearing in mind the difficulty of offering descriptions of the Divine, careful articulations of "She who Is" can enliven the relationship of many to Spirit and create a space of inspiration through which to seek out a personal experience of God.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Stanley Romaine Hopper, "Introduction" *Interpretation: The Poetry of Meaning* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc, 1967) xiv.

<sup>145</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1992) 244.

## IMAGINATIVE WRITINGS: THEOPOETICS

Full of merit, yet poetically, man

Dwells on this earth<sup>146</sup>

Despite the undeniable difficulty of putting God into words without flattening or oversimplifying Her/Him, some theologians have concluded that not all language must be objectifying. In fact, Hopper states that, when used carefully, language can serve the purpose of “bringing Being to appearance, of letting that which is appear *as* that which is.”<sup>147</sup> But what kind of language enables such a disclosure of the Divine without fixating it? Only language that breaks the habits and structures of language can leave room for God. This might appear as a disruption in communication, disjointed phrasings or interruptions. Writing of this sort involves the reader in a way that directed and authoritative language does not. Another literary modality used to invite ambiguity, curiosity and a relationship to the mysterious is poetic language. Engaging with living metaphor through reclaiming myth and a poetic perspective of the divine responds directly to the prosaic theological approaches that result in the “progressive reification of doctrine, squeezing the myth out, trying to contain the symbolic in a science and to reduce mysteries to knowledge.”<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 216.

<sup>147</sup> Stanley Romaine Hopper, "Introduction" *Interpretation: The Poetry of Meaning* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc, 1967) xv.

<sup>148</sup> Stanley Romaine Hopper, "The Literary Imagination and the Doing of Theology" *The Way of Transfiguration: Religious Imagination as Theopoiesis* (Westminster/John Knox: Louisville, 1992) 208.

The contribution of Martin Heidegger to the study of hermeneutics has been marked as the inspiration for theo-poetics.<sup>149</sup> His writing on poetry and “primary being” was adopted by Heinrich Ott of Basel who later proposed a systematic theology based on Heidegger’s later work.<sup>150</sup>

Contrary to Classical theists, for whom God is defined through the realm of metaphysics, Heidegger believed that truth and meaning were not found in creed but rather in poetry that “causes dwelling to be dwelling.”<sup>151</sup> In his book *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Heidegger speaks out against those who rage “around the earth [with] an unbridled yet clever talking, writing and broadcasting ... spoken words. Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man.”<sup>152</sup> For Heidegger, language mediated or enabled a conversation between God and the world through a fundamental reciprocity found in poetry itself – a means of naming God.<sup>153</sup> Heidegger detested the kinds of rote language which turn language and expression into merely “printed word.”<sup>154</sup> He described language as something which must be listened to rather than manipulated and abused. It is exactly through listening to the “appeal of language” that poetry is

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<sup>149</sup> L. B. C. Keefe-Perry, "Theopoetics: Process and Perspective" (*Christianity and Literature* 58.4, 2009) 584.

<sup>150</sup> Stanley Romaine Hopper, "Introduction" *Interpretation: The Poetry of Meaning* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc, 1967) ix.

<sup>151</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 215.

<sup>152</sup> Heidegger 215.

<sup>153</sup> Hopper xv.

<sup>154</sup> Heidegger 215.

born. Poetry, for Heidegger, represented a freedom and openness to the unforeseen that moves beyond a static search for the “correct” understanding of God.<sup>155</sup>

In 1962, inspired by Heidegger’s work, Theopoetics was recognized at a conference of the First Consultation in Hermeneutics at Drew University.<sup>156</sup> At that meeting and during the two subsequent conferences, three distinct goals emerged, defining what theopoetics would become. The first goal was to explore the hermeneutic process within theology that defined both religious meaning and interpretation. The second goal was to use the work of the later Heidegger and its appeal to use poetry and artwork “as the model for the thinking and saying of primary truth” through which to reevaluate the theological process.<sup>157</sup> Their final objective was to place greater significance on the use of metaphor, symbol, image and myth in the expression of “primary truth.” These three objectives held at their core an understanding that language regarding truth and God is inherently metaphorical in nature. As Scott Holland articulated in "Theology is a Kind of Writing: The Emergence of Theopoetics," theology “must be understood as a poetics, not a metaphysics.”<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 216.

<sup>156</sup> Stanley Romaine Hopper, "Introduction" *Interpretation: The Poetry of Meaning* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc, 1967) ix.

<sup>157</sup> Hopper xii.

<sup>158</sup> Scott Holland, "Theology is a Kind of Writing: The Emergence of Theopoetics" (*Cross Currents* 47.3, 1997) 319.

## CHARACTERISTICS

Theopoetics takes for granted that the true nature of God and life are intrinsically hidden because our modes of perceiving the world are limited and finite.<sup>159</sup> Thus theopoetics uses a mytho-poetic perspective as a formula for “reading” the world poetically, engaging ourselves in the task of seeing life as significant and meaningful.

The reality of living in a constantly unfolding world finds no inconsistencies with poetry. Poetry can serve as the verbal expression of an indescribable God because it makes no claims of being complete. Through preserving the mystery of God, poetry undermines dead metaphors and insists on language that remains open to interpretation. Effective poetic discourse does not describe God; rather it attempts to supply the reader with an experience of God.

The realm of the poetic imagination proves to be “theology’s least inaccurate language,” naturally pulling us away from everyday habits towards a felt sense of the divine.<sup>160</sup> In reevaluating the use of language in order that it might more fully express the mystery of God, the inclusion of imagination is essential. Acknowledging the remarkable use of metaphor in the human perception of ourselves and the world, an integration of metaphor, narrative and symbol into religious language becomes a potent means of refreshing old language and exclusive metaphor. These tools are not only venues through which one experiences the essence of Spirit but are also a space within which full engagement in daily life occurs. “Theology and Imagination: From

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<sup>159</sup> Stanley Romaine Hopper, "Introduction" *Interpretation: The Poetry of Meaning* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc, 1967) xv.

<sup>160</sup> "Theology & Imagination" *Christian Higher Education* 5 (2006) 2.

Theory to Practice” points toward the significant relationship between the imaginative nature of poetry and describing the divine, explaining that imagination “can liberate us to be more receptive of mystery and through narrative and poetic forms [one can] enter into the symbolic mediations of revelation.”<sup>161</sup> Engagement with poetry and myth become a vehicle through which to access the Divine. Language of this kind moves humans toward personal and societal transformation.

One contribution of theopoetics to Christian thought is its quest for fresh language and new, poetic metaphor grounding writings in the particulars of experience.<sup>162</sup> Keefe-Perry, in his article “Theopoetics: Process and Perspective” explains the need for this new form of Christian writing, stating that

most modern theologies are so abstract and removed from life that it is possible to think of them as functioning and comprehending on their own ... Theopoetics attempts to highlight this fact and address it head-on, transforming personal experience into a spark for further conversation rather than authoritatively proclaiming abstract universal truth or interpretation.<sup>163</sup>

Through their writing, theopoets seek to create pieces that, in their poetic vein, can be reinterpreted over and over. Theopoetics invites a conversation that requires not one distinct perspective but instead openness to many.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> "Theology & Imagination" *Christian Higher Education* 5 (2006) 2-3.

<sup>162</sup> L. B. C. Keefe-Perry, "Theopoetics: Process and Perspective" (*Christianity and Literature* 58.4, 2009) 583.

<sup>163</sup> L. B. C. Keefe-Perry 594.

<sup>164</sup> L. B. C. Keefe-Perry 596.

Theopoetics is described by Matt Guynn at the Presidential Forum Workshop as a form of writing or a theological stance that uses poetic engagement as a bridge between our language and worldview.<sup>165</sup> While offering more diverse and creative articulations of God, theopoetics searches for a means to incite experience through words, to make the divine relevant to daily life and to reveal the multitude of forms through which God is accessed. In this way, the power of “poetry does not reside in verbal acrobatics but in its ability to capture the experience of a fleeting moment in language that persists.”<sup>166</sup> Theopoetics thus rejects “unbridled yet clever” language which seeks to dominate or assert through words. David Miller, a student of Hopper, describes one way of undergoing the theopoetic process. First, theopoetics requires a “stepping back” from a classical Western worldview that prizes intellectualism, literalism and supernaturalism above all else. Theopoetics then invites one to “step down” into a space of darkness in which familiar tools of theology and metaphysics are removed and previous means of constructing meaning are neither available nor adequate. The final step into theopoetics is “stepping through,” becoming available to fresh interpretations of existence, in a sense “re-poetizing” the world.<sup>167</sup>

If one is to create a text that truly speaks to the human experience of the divine, the body must be included as it is through our physical and cognitive selves

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<sup>165</sup> Matt Guynn, "Presidential Forum Workshops, Bethany Theological Seminary" (22 Feb. 2009) 99.

<sup>166</sup> L. B. C. Keefe-Perry, "Theopoetics: Process and Perspective" (*Christianity and Literature* 58.4, 2009) 595.

<sup>167</sup> David L. Miller, "Introduction" *Why Persimmons? and Other Poems: Transformations of Theology in Poetry*. (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987) 4-5.

that God is “felt”. Similar to Duncan’s call for an embodied Christianity, theopoetics describes a God that is constantly unfolding and who is realized through life, with the physical body as a vessel. Theopoet Catherine Keller eloquently explores this relationship as she describes silent meditation, pointing to the way in which the “enfolding and unfolding of the divine” are made manifest simply by “attending to our breath. We realize bodily the rhythm of the conceptual panentheism.”<sup>168</sup> Attention to the human (and bodily) experience of the divine further supports the notion that God cannot be explained once and for all. So long as we acknowledge our incomplete understanding of God, there is a place for the lived experience of the Divine in theological dialogue.

In consideration of this, Keller, in her book *Face of the Deep: a Theology of Becoming*, presents a notion of a Trinitarian God. She renames “God the Father” -- *complicatio* or “folding together,” which Keller expands to include “the chaos which contains all.”<sup>169</sup> The second element of her trinity is “Christ” -- *explicatio*, meaning “that which ‘unfolds’ what otherwise remains ‘folded together.’” *Explicatio* means to *realize*, i.e. at once to *divine* and to *actualize*.<sup>170</sup> The Holy Spirit in this trinity is the power of love. Keller ingeniously offers a model for experimenting with language in order to express the indescribable. Within her trinity is the principle of a constant unfolding or newness of the divine, essential to the theopoetic perspective. A God that is at once “the chaos that contains all,” the constant unfolding of what normally

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<sup>168</sup> Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 235.

<sup>169</sup> Keller 231.

<sup>170</sup> Keller 231.

remains folded, the act of realizing and actualizing, and love all at once preserves quite a bit of mystery. Keller's delicious description could be described as a living metaphor – a metaphor for the Divine that invites the unfolding of oneself and provides a feeling of oneness with an unknowable yet knowable universe – God as “mystery beyond all imagining.”<sup>171</sup> This description neither dictates nor limits one's ability to connect with God personally.

## PRINCIPLES

Though it does not align itself with a series of dictated beliefs, theopoetics is founded upon seven central principles. First, and most essential to theopoetics, is the integration of the experience of God into theology. Second, theopoetics seeks to maintain an invitational stance. This intentional openness to conversation acknowledges the diverse presentations and experiences of God, seeking to draw them out. The invitational nature of theopoetics leads naturally to its third objective - to give voice to marginalized groups whose experiences of God have previously gone unacknowledged by “orthodox” or mainstream religion. A fourth, and crucial, element of theopoetics is the insistence that there is no one exclusively correct understanding of God. In fact, it is this point alone that enables theopoetics to celebrate what Roland Faber calls polyphilia, or the love of multiplicity.<sup>172</sup> Fifth, theopoetics follows Aquinas' advice and places at the center of its writing the belief that new and refreshed language helps communities and individuals transform. This

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<sup>171</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1992) 7.

<sup>172</sup> L. B. C. Keefe-Perry, "Theopoetics: Process and Perspective" (*Christianity and Literature* 58.4, 2009) 596.

principle supports the sixth principle, that potent and poetic language about God serves as a call to action. Finally, the theo poetic perspective views all of life as spiritual and seeks the means of inviting the experience of God into daily life. Theopoetics speaks to our longing for the divine and the meaningful in the every day.

### **THE INVITATION TO SIT AT THE TABLE**

A stance of invitation and conversation is a deeply Christian value, found in Jesus' most essential teachings. Some argue that the desired transformation of language can be measured by the willingness of a tradition to engage in a conversation that, when had, might include voices previously shut out. Keefe-Perry reminds us that just as "Jesus tended the widowed, the orphaned and the sick, so too must the church turn to the margins and engage all in conversation" because "radical hospitality and invitation draw us into conversation and communion."<sup>173</sup>

Through this invitational stance, theopoetics exemplifies the inclusive language found to be missing in classical dogma and doctrine. Conversation is equally significant for theopoetics because it engages individuals and communities in a collective search for meaning, renewing a sense of the sacredness and possibilities of everyday life.<sup>174</sup> As a practice, theopoiesis as conversation makes public the careful dialog that emerges when communities stay open to notions of truth and

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<sup>173</sup> L. B. C. Keefe-Perry, "Theopoetics: Process and Perspective" (*Christianity and Literature* 58.4, 2009) 596.

<sup>174</sup> Scott Holland, "Theology is a Kind of Writing: The Emergence of Theopoetics" (*Cross Currents* 47.3, 1997) 319.

meaning beyond those presented in classical theism.<sup>175</sup> The invitation to conversation both links theoetics to the very roots of Christian practice and challenges key classical Christian worldviews that assert their ability to determine God's one truth.

### **A MULTITUDE OF VOICES**

To enforce one rigid truth about God would be to deny the significant contribution made by those who dwell outside of leadership. This viewpoint reminds us that “all voices are called for in the Kingdom of God ... [for] each life is valued and brings something to the table.”<sup>176</sup> In order to include and honor a multitude of voices and perspectives, theoetics acknowledges that theology cannot remain centralized in our institutions of higher learning and our intellectual communities. Theoetics attempts to return to the people ownership of their own religious experience and to help them find their voice in the expression of it. Phil Zylla, in his essay “What Language Can I Borrow” cites the pressing need for Christian doctrines to include and value the voices of the oppressed, suggesting that theoetics might serve as a vehicle for churches and leaders to integrate minority perspectives.<sup>177</sup> In fact, Johnson, through the lens of seeking gender equality within the Judeo-Christian society writes about just this subject. She describes the transformation occurring in

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<sup>175</sup> Jason Derr, “In Consideration of the Theopoetic” (*CrossLeft: Balancing the Christian Voice*, 2008) 2.

<sup>176</sup> L. Callid Keefe-Perry, “Toward a Heraldic Gospel: From Monorthodox Doctrine to Theopoetic Perspectives on Revelation and Repentance” (2009) 3.

<sup>177</sup> Phil Zylla, “What Language can I Borrow?” *McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry* 131.

some circles within which exclusively male God-talk has been identified as a problem. New language has been “born as women gather together creatively in solidarity and prayer.”<sup>178</sup> Those who have taken on this challenge did so not exclusively as intellectuals. Instead, they sought to integrate their personal experience of the divine to refresh Christian language about God. This engaged process of “naming toward God” as Mary Daly refers to it, serves as one example of the possibilities offered to transform the experience of the oppressed or underprivileged through a re-engagement with language.<sup>179</sup>

### TRUTH REDEFINED

“I believe ... in the right of every man to worship God in his own metaphor”<sup>180</sup>

As the preceding quotation suggests, theopoetics does not preach the correctness of its distinct set of metaphors, nor does it claim to have interpreted God in the only valid way. Quite to the contrary, theopoetics calls for a multitude of voices, to find their place in the conversation. Theopoetics rejects any system that claims to understand God completely through one philosophical or religious construct.<sup>181</sup> Instead, theopoetics develops definitions of God through the opening of

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<sup>178</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1992) 5.

<sup>179</sup> Johnson 5.

<sup>180</sup> Stanley Romaine Hopper, "Introduction" *Interpretation: The Poetry of Meaning* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc, 1967) xviii.

<sup>181</sup> L. B. C. Keefe-Perry, "Theopoetics: Process and Perspective" (*Christianity and Literature* 58.4, 2009) 587.

doors rather than the closing of them. Searching for meaning, within theopoetics, is done always within this context.<sup>182</sup> Just as a poem will continue to be reinterpreted each time it is read, finding new meaning in a theopoetic text becomes an exciting and personal journey. This form of writing remains conscious of the reality that even in writing about the Divine, humans remain limited and imperfect, influenced by their unique communities, experiences and interpretations. While our limitations do not negate the idea that we were created in the image of God or perhaps even with a piece of God in us, they do inhibit our ability to speak universally. Keefe-Perry affirms that the “depth and mystery of Christ’s power is too profound to be abstracted and articulated in entirety” such that “attempts to describe the nature and capacity of God should be grounded in experience and expressed only with the acknowledgement that they are but one aspect of the divine.”<sup>183</sup> Theopoets reject any “truths” that claim to be the only truth possible. For them, the image of water running through one’s hands might represent our ability to understand God - the water touches our hands for a precious moment and then slides past us, ever transforming. Keefe-Perry summarizes Melanie May’s potent articulation of the search for God as merely “instances of language grasping at slivers of the spirit, attempting to speak personal experience into the Mystery hoping it would catch.”<sup>184</sup> Theopoetic language serves as one attempt at describing the indescribable creativity and abundance that is the Divine,

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<sup>182</sup> Jason Derr, “In Consideration of the Theopoetic” (*CrossLeft: Balancing the Christian Voice*, 2008) 1.

<sup>183</sup> L. B. C. Keefe-Perry, "Theopoetics: Process and Perspective" (*Christianity and Literature* 58.4, 2009) 581.

<sup>184</sup> Keefe-Perry 590.

acknowledging that each attempt contains a sliver of God's essence rather than its whole.

## **SOCIAL ACTION**

Though theopoetics' primary means of communicating to an audience is through language, it should not be imagined that the sole intention is to change language. Quite the contrary, an essential element of theopoetic language is to inspire action. Some theologians and religious scholars argue that social transformation requires the refiguring of political and religious language. Poetic language, along with other forms of artistic expression, seems to be an ideal medium through which to invite this transformation. Transforming the modality of Western rhetoric, from scientific and logic-oriented explanations of God to poetic ones, liberates language to engage and motivate readers at a profound level. Theopoetics revitalizes the Church through language that invites individuals and communities to purge themselves of their own complacencies.<sup>185</sup> Guynn argues that "dwelling" in the poetic serves as a stance that "promises to deepen and develop social change organizing, by ... an empowerment rooted in Presence and Power."<sup>186</sup> The quest for invitational and creative language seeks not only to invite a personal and authentic connection to the Divine but also to incite social change through the vibrancy of a theopoetic call to action.

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<sup>185</sup> Amos Wilder *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 23.

<sup>186</sup> Matt Guynn, "Theopoetics and Social Change" (*Cross Currents* 60.1, 2010) 1.

## A CALL TO ACTION

Just as theopoetics engages people to experience the richness and potency of divinity in daily life, it propels people to action. Heidegger describes “dwelling” in poetry as a means of meeting language in mutual engagement. Theopoetics “dwells” in scripture rather than simply “retelling” it. Similar to Quakerism, “dwelling” in religious thought signifies a relationship to language that includes a willingness to act upon its calling. In this way, theopoetics does not propose “an-easier-to-get-along-with-Christian” but instead invites a true alignment of one’s words with one’s deeds.<sup>187</sup> Theopoetics discourages oppression and coercion, inspiring people to move beyond merely mental engagement towards concrete actions.

The presence of social action, a key aspect for every theopoet, reflects the importance of a theology that remains relevant to modern life. Linguistic expressions of God and religion that do not encourage action toward the betterment of one’s own community and world fail to speak to our current experience. A primary purpose of theology in general, but certainly of theopoetics, is to act “as a divine lure”, pulling at the heart’s sentiments and irresistibly drawing people into action for good.<sup>188</sup>

Theopoetics uses refreshed and compelling language to encourage actions for greater justice.

## AN EVERYDAY GOD

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<sup>187</sup> L. Callid Keefe-Perry, “Toward a Heraldic Gospel: From Monorthodox Doctrine to Theopoetic Perspectives on Revelation and Repentance” (2009) 21.

<sup>188</sup> Scott Holland, *How do Stories Save Us?* (Dudley: Eerdmans, 2006).

Living in metaphor offers humans an extraordinary opportunity with regards to theology. Internalizing metaphors about God that place us in direct relationship with an unfolding Universe/Spirit instills a livable theology, one which engages, inspires and fulfills. Theology is meant to be “lived, preached, prayed and implemented in our lives.”<sup>189</sup>

The Western world has learned to place its faith in the salvific qualities of economic success. Within a context where investing in a capitalist model is awarded both political and cultural attention, theopoetics is an urgent reminder that fulfillment from a connection to the divine in daily life rewards more deeply than a paycheck and is accessible to everyone. The empty myth that happiness is attained through money is replaced in theopoetics by the reminder that “God is manifesting as real” everywhere.<sup>190</sup>

The rewards of a theopoetic model are innumerable, transforming a goal-oriented life towards one that appreciates small and precious moments. Theopoetics facilitates the “necessary re-engagement with the small things of life, which will then be seen as more essentially part of the divine.”<sup>191</sup> Theopoetics responds not only to mainstream Christianity but to a society whose metaphors are equally exclusive. Take for example the adage “time is money.” Many of the metaphors repeated within a materialistic and individualistic society revolve around efficiency and gain. Instead, theopoetics invites an exploration of the places in which humans find true

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<sup>189</sup> Jason Derr, “In Consideration of the Theopoetic” (*CrossLeft: Balancing the Christian Voice*, 2008) 1.

<sup>190</sup> L. B. C. Keefe-Perry, "Theopoetics: Process and Perspective" (*Christianity and Literature* 58.4, 2009) 598.

<sup>191</sup> Keefe-Perry 585.

companionship, peace and grace. Theopoetics activates language which looks towards the divine made visible in daily life.

## THE QUEST FOR MEANING

Crucial to the theopoetic worldview is the engagement of individuals in their own process, in the creative envisioning of one's own life story as meaningful and significant. Theopoesis is a process of viewing the world as divine. Most people raised in Euro-American post-Enlightenment societies unconsciously view their world through logic and fact based reasoning. While this may encourage a more "rational" understanding of the world, it significantly detracts from people's ability to interpret their life experience in meaningful and spiritual terms. Keefe-Perry suggests that, for those who utilize a theopoetic perspective, "the spiritual reality of the world ... become[s] easier to perceive, to poetically articulate, and to live into."<sup>192</sup>

Theopoetics is not simply a means of expressing God using descriptions that people can in turn experience personally. It is an invitation to "read" the world and experience life poetically.

Using religion to develop meaning within one's life is not new for Christianity. There have always been strands of Christian theology that explored realms of understanding and meaning to offer a profound explanation of "human life and the whole universe in the light of the graciousness of divine mystery."<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> L. B. C. Keefe-Perry, "Theopoetics: Process and Perspective" (*Christianity and Literature* 58.4, 2009) 586.

<sup>193</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1992) 17.

Reinterpreting texts is integral to the continuation of the tradition of meaning making within Christianity. Poetic language facilitates this. The following poem by Roszak reveals the significance of “reading” God in all experiences:

Unless the eye catch fire  
 The God will not be seen  
 Unless the ear catch fire  
 The God will not be heard  
 Unless the tongue catch fire  
 The God will not be named  
 Unless the heart catch fire  
 The God will not be loved  
 Unless the mind catch fire  
 The God will not be known<sup>194</sup>

God will not be known until one has fully engaged in a poetic process to experience the Holy, allowing the “divine tones and timbres to emerge from the everyday.”<sup>195</sup> For theologians like Johnson, the pursuit of human flourishing, particularly for those who have previously been oppressed, is the result of such engagement and is central to the purpose of theological stances such as those developed by theopoetics. The conversation that theopoetics seeks to invite in order to include marginalized voices turns inward to meet the objectives of a tradition that encourages spiritual

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<sup>194</sup> Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends* (Doubleday: Garden City, 1972) 272.

<sup>195</sup> L. B. C. Keefe-Perry, "Theopoetics: Process and Perspective" (*Christianity and Literature* 58.4, 2009) 594.

engagement with life's meaning. Jason Derr expresses the theopoetic invitation as not just a conversation with others but also "a conversation with the deepest places of our selves and our audience."<sup>196</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The suggestion that humans engage with life through metaphor invites theologians to take more seriously the language and metaphor present in current Classical theism and consider possible alternatives. Theopoetics serves as a serious response to this invitation. The use of poetic language assists in a preservation of the mystery of the Divine previously lost to literal or exclusive metaphors. Similarly, the acknowledgment of each presentation of God as only one piece of God's true nature acknowledges that all people have access to God and invites many voices to share in the conversation. Theopoetics becomes a way of life through encouraging the "reading" of life as poetic, meaningful and spiritual. Thus poetry becomes one form of bringing God into the world.

Theopoetics acknowledges the difficulty that lies in using an inherently unchanging modality, such as language, to invite the Divine presence to take form before us. Language is not the only means through which God is experienced, yet as such a crucial form of human interaction, it is essential and significant that attempts be made in drawing out the ineffable nature of Spirit in words.

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<sup>196</sup> Jason Derr, "In Consideration of the Theopoetic" (*CrossLeft: Balancing the Christian Voice*, 2008) 2.

## CONCLUSION

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The preceding chapters have drawn our attention to the limitations of fixed religious language such as creeds for describing and invoking the divine. We have seen that theopoets (poetry), Isadora Duncan (modern dance) and Quakers (silent worship) all reject creed and conventional uses of language in favor of direct spiritual experience that moves us into a realm beyond words. Silent worship, dance and theopoetics each invite divinity or some greater power into the presence of the individual and the collective. For each, the modality is distinct. The Quakers offer a stilling of the mind to enter into worship. Isadora Duncan uses movement and dance to transcend the everyday and deepen a conscious connection with divinity. Theopoetics invites the reader into the divine mystery through poetic words that escape the limits of exclusive or literalized metaphors. Each of these tools powerfully challenges the conventional uses of language and in some ways, language itself. Through silence, Quakers hear the “words” of the divine, found only in the stillness that the absence of language allows. Dance challenges language by locating the experience of the divine in the movement of the body through dance that “listens” to something other than words. This dance is organic and connected to a source greater than the self or technique. Equally subversive of conventional language, poetry uses words to bring to the surface the inconsistencies of language, breaking out of normal usage.

## **STILLNESS**

Regardless of the modality each chooses to access the divine, they share in common a practice of returning the practitioner or their audience to stillness through the use of silence, dance or poetry. From within a being that empties itself of all thought and distraction, a deep and pure stillness emerges. This stillness opens the soul to God. Thus, at its core, this thesis uses language to critique language. In the search for the divine, it invites the reader to leave behind classical theological language and to transform their experience through stillness. The work of each modality described explores a means through which to speak stillness. This attempt changes not only the individual. It operates on a communal level as well. Poetry, silent ministry and dance that emerge from stillness permit a sense of unity with the divine through this reverberating stillness.

## **SIMILARITIES**

The forms of dance, silent worship and theopoetry described above share some common beliefs. All three hold at their core the belief that *all* individuals have access to a powerful and authentic personal experience of the divine. For them, the divine is not an entity separate from all other life, nor is its nature such that it can only be found within an institution. Instead its presence can be found within everyone and in the every day. This presence, while it can move through an individual, is greater than any one individual. While the names for this Divine presence may vary, including the soul, Christ, the holy, mystery, all three modalities view its source as

more vast than an individual, even though it can be found within or through the individual.

## **INCLUSIVITY**

If the divine is available to all through inner experience, it is not surprising that the “theologies” examined in this thesis transform language and its uses through a non-hierarchical understanding of religion. They hold that encountering God on earth must happen through one’s direct experience. Each practice challenges classical language as Christianity’s primary mode of expression. Each proposes an alternate means through which one accesses God *through* experience. All three oppose hierarchy and, as a result, they each empower marginalized groups. While classical Christian thought discredits marginalized voices not accustomed to writing and expressing religion in the ways of classical theology, these three traditions’ emphasis on experience returns to the disempowered their voice. Marginalized groups, often viewed as “less than,” do not find their experiences reflected in classical theology. These three alternative experiential approaches and their accompanying theologies offer the marginalized a chance to validate their own experience. Duncan’s dance gives women, in particular, agency in a way that conventional Christian practice has not. Returning women’s attention to their bodies, previously scorned and misrepresented, reconnects women to spirit through embodiment and to their own power. Quaker practice, with its emphasis on “that of God in everyone” leads to a rejection of social and ecclesiastical hierarchies. As a tradition, it addresses the separation of practitioners from the divine through priests by removing all practices

that require officiation by a religious leader. Theopoetics accepts a range of religious experiences through its use of language that avoids labeling what is “true” of God. Not dictating religious truth preserves the element of mystery in divine experience and renews a commitment within theology to validate the distinct ways in which a marginalized individual might experience and describe the divine.

## **LISTENING**

We have seen in each of the preceding three chapters, a connection with the divine is neither constant nor static. Dance, poetry and silence are not abstract concepts. Rather they are activities in which an individual engages in real time. We have noted that these dissenters hold a state of readiness to be as important as the practice itself. Quakers embody this state of readiness most clearly, practicing silent worship starting with a period of opening oneself to God. This is, essentially, a period of listening which Quakers call “waiting upon God.” While all three share in common a period of waiting or listening that precedes an encounter with the divine, what one listens for gets defined differently. Quakers listen for God’s will. Modern dancers listen for the soul’s unique movement in the body. Theopoets and their readers listen for the underlying mystery alluded to within the text. All three modalities agree that this deep opening stillness from which communion emerges is not easy to achieve nor is success guaranteed. Authentic experience of this kind requires full engagement, both physical and mental.

## READING THE WORLD

Dance, silent worship and theopoetics are not intended exclusively to provide momentary glimpses of the mystery and divinity of life. These traditions place at their core a belief in one's ability to integrate this experience and embody it in daily life as an expression of the Living Light.<sup>197</sup> All find a natural alignment between spirituality and action, which has implications for everyday life. Connecting with the divine source through silence has prompted a deep sense of longing to serve God's creation in the world on the part of the Quaker community. Listening to God's will in Meeting for Worship has resulted in a powerful call to work for social justice. Similarly, theopoets train the spirit to "read" the world differently. Far beyond merely shifting away from literalist interpretations of God, theopoetics offers individuals a tool through which to bring mystery and meaning into daily life just as one does when reading poetry. The effects of Duncan's dancing also radiate beyond the dance floor. Dance requires a greater sense of embodiment and, when fully engaged, embodiment and empowerment transform daily life through a consciousness and body that are truly listening to what is true for oneself.

Those who have chosen to "read" the world differently in the three ways presented in this thesis, believe they experience greater effectiveness and peace in life. Those who explore theopoetics find a deep engagement with meaning making in their lives. Dance inspires greater embodiment, where women in particular find the confidence to discover trust and wisdom within the body while legitimating the

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<sup>197</sup> Martin Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) 44.

“voice” of the body. Duncan defines dance as a key to coping with, and finding peace in the midst of suffering. Through silent worship, Quakers tap into a vibrancy that many report allows them to access within themselves an inner peace and silence, despite outward noise, even after having returned to normal life. Each of the three forms identifies a life pulse within every individual that is linked to a life affirming God.

### **REJECTING FORMULA**

The three techniques described above challenge not only language but also the habituation and routinization that language invariably leads to, disconnecting people from an original and emerging experience within themselves. Thus, they hold in common a rejection of formula. For each, any process and experience should be spontaneous, unique, not replicable, and definitely not predetermined by creed. This enables an aliveness of speech, poetry and movement. The practices presented here, while neither comfortable nor easy, emerge from a vibrant and connected stillness.

The shift away from formulaic, ritual or creedal language poses a distinct challenge that words, if they are to be used, must address. Quakers and theopoets distinguish between language and languages. If language *is* used, it cannot be one language. It must be languages, words that respond to the question, what are *your* words? Through this breaking of habit, one finds distinctness *within* a sense of unity when participating in a practice that invites the individual to listen. Through a creative and unique expression of the resulting experience, these groups believe that they unite with a divine source before and through language. This challenge is

facilitated through the removal of prescribed formulas for interpretation, technique and prayer. Unlike ballet, Duncan's dance refuses to create a fixed technique. Dancing without a formulated technique demands that one listen to one's own body, and believe that the body has something to say. Quakers remove all ritual and recitation of creed so that all sharing is authentic and spontaneous. Theopoetics challenges classical theology by using language in a way that defies literal and exclusive interpretations.

## **COMMUNITY**

Though distinct in their forms, all three dissenting practices believe it is critical to connect the individual experience of the divine to community. Dance is deepened through a connection with an audience whereby both the dancer and the viewer experience the soul, or the divine. Essential to the Quaker form of silence is its communal nature. Meeting for Worship occurs in the presence of others. Words (spoken ministry) in this context, as well as one's own silence, deepen the collective connection with the divine and the silence or emptying stillness of those gathered. Poetry similarly builds a relationship between the theopoet and the reader, who integrates the message and mystery presented by the author. All three invite the soul to unify with other souls in the presence of mystery, becoming one through joining with community, an audience or a reader. In this way, each practice presented can have a deepening effect on others and bring them into their own sense of unity with the divine. All invite the soul to unify with others and with the divine.

**AVAILABLE TO ALL?**

Each of these practices aims to place a relationship to the Divine back into the realm of experience, rather than creed. A ground up approach to God, centered in stillness, can be accessed through dance, silence and theopoetics. One might ask if it is actually possible to make religious experience available to the layperson? Duncan's dance form, because it requires no particular technique and the practice of silent worship, because it demands no creedal commitments in order to enter into it, serve as universally available practices. Though both modern dance and silent worship were founded as a direct response to the perceived limitations which creeds place on one's ability to experience the divine, neither requires a full commitment to the Christian faith or to a set of Christian beliefs in order to fully participate. This is less true of theopoetics. While theopoetics embraces many of the insights expressed through Quakerism and Duncan's theopraxis, it is distinctly Christian. While theopoetics breaks out of traditional Christian linguistic habits in order to bring freshness and depth of experience, it retains other traditional elements. Theopoetics rejects notions through which God might become *strictly* a metaphor. Theopoets expand their vocabulary while staying close to theologies that maintain Jesus' literalism just as much as his trans-immanence. Theopoetics seeks to invite marginalized groups into the center of its practice through an emphasis on experience. This invitation, however, extends itself primarily to marginalized Christian groups, offering them a safe and respectful space within the context of Christian theology. Theopoetics makes room for a broader description of God and one's experience of God than classical theism. Yet, unlike the other two forms discussed, theopoetics remains in dialog with

an exclusively Christian community. In this way, theopoetics walks a fine line, holding onto certain traditional elements of Christianity while, at the same time, engaging with personal and mystical forms of relating to God.

The theopoetic balance, preserving a Christian theology while inviting in mystical experiences and personal perspectives, is not easy. The practical result of this delicate work is a poetic theology that is rich yet complicated. The complexity of some theopoetic works may perpetuate the system of disconnection which it seeks to articulate and dispel. This demands that the reader examine whether it is, in fact, possible to resolve the problem of language through language. Unlike Duncan's dance and Quakers' silent worship, theopoetics reaches out to a limited audience that is both Christian and has the capacity to understand theologically minded literature. Though theopoetics claims to address minority groups within the Christian faith, theopoetics seems less accessible than a non-linguistic and directly experiential practice.

## **CONCLUSION**

This piece began with a critique of language. Quakers, Duncan and the theopoets recognized the ascendancy of analytical, literal and scientific approaches to understanding God and yet persisted in their dissent. All three of the dissenters I examined responded directly to Classical Christian language and proposed alternatives that I find compelling. I am persuaded that an emphasis on defining God in an ultimate sense or "proving" God's true nature is misplaced. Quaker silence, Duncan's dance and theopoetics, by releasing a need for creed and an attachment to

hierarchy, place spiritual experience at the core of their understanding of God. This orientation does not require unanimous agreement about what God is. Committing to the discernment of the Divine through lived experience is all they need to agree on. All three presume that a direct experience of God is accessible and significant. Quakers claim silence as an access point to the unfolding mystery of God. Thus, Quakers remystify stillness. Duncan reclaims the body as an always available source to glimpse an unknowable God, thereby remystifying movement as a source of divine wisdom. Theopoets reorient their relationship to language by using it to create a mystical sense of the Divine through poetic language. All three experience the Divine, evolving and changing, through a listening and vibrant presence that is alive. Each returns agency to the individual, inviting in the non-rational, mystical side of life into lived experience.

Importantly for me, each of these modalities stays close to a powerful desire to restore mystery to a description of the Divine and spiritual experience. I deem it of equal significance that they all believe in the possibility and presence of an experience of the divine in everyday life.

This research has convinced me that theopoetics, Quaker silence and Duncan's dance call us towards a deeper human experience that evades description in the Classical Christian terms so commonly used. It is my hope that the discussion of these dissenting practices may be read as an invitation into religious experience. I trust that a shift away from language that dictates what God is or what an encounter with God should be, can, for many, breathe life back into an engagement with religious experience.

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