Reflections on Zero

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And as I stared through the obscurity,
I saw what seemed a cluster of great towers,
whereat I cried: "Master, what is this city?"
. . . my Master said:
the better to prepare you for strange truth,
let me explain those shapes you see ahead:
They are not towers but giants. They stand in the well
From the navel down; and stationed round its bank
They mount guard on the final pit of Hell.
(Dante 1954: XXXI, 19-33)

I

In a now classic reflection on the meaning of silence, Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote: "we must consider speech before it is spoken, the background of silence which does not cease to surround it, and without which it would say nothing" (1964: 46).[1] This silence toward which Merleau-Ponty directed us was much more than merely an absence of words, since without it words themselves would not be possible. In the arena of religion, the sacred phenomenologically expresses this same defining modality of silence: that is, both silence and the sacred do not interrupt forms of representation, but are percussive determinants in relation to which sound and existence are ordered. It is silence, in this sense, that allows for all representations of meaning; and so, by this very principle, silence is profoundly ontological in its exposition of, as Charles Long has said, an alternate "kind of reality and existence" (1999: 69).

In large measure, the history of the modern West has revolved around a dialectic of silence. This however, has been a silence imposed by systems of signification, and framed in terms of the historical and moral ascendancy of the West itself, whereby the silencing of much of the world's people was a consequence of the clamorous self-promotion of Western Europeans and their New

World project. Through its languages and modes of conquest, the West effectively silenced vast numbers of human communities, ostensibly removing their voices to the margins of the construction of modernity. To a great extent, this vast silence has been regarded as a benign vacuum, as an historical absence of meaningful representation; but, as Wittgenstein once noted, there are modes of representation for which language does not always exist (1963: 51);[2] for those who underwent this form of signification, the effects were not only historical, but ontological—a mode of being emerged from the imposition of silence that could not be contained within the language of conquest. On the morning of September 11, 2001, the ontological power of this mode of silence erupted in the United States, hurling the silencing West, for a terrifying moment, into such a humanly re-defining arena.

The universalizing dynamic of scientism that was the principle expression of the Enlightenment was also, among other things, a mode by which colonialism and conquest were made possible in modernity (Long 1999: 65-66). Colonial conquest was a fundamentally silencing enterprise, as people and landscapes were redefined as commodities; and despite the fact that it was their very presence that made Western economic and political ascendancy possible, the veiling of these communities in a language of conquest effectively reduced them to "*raw material*" rather than partners in the colonial enterprise (Long 1999: 66). The refusal to admit non-Europeans as dialogic partners in modernity was articulated obviously in broadly applied designations that allowed for wide-ranging numbers of communities to be perceived as situated outside the temporal and moral parameters of Western Europe. The notions of the *primitive*, of *civilization*, of *modernity*, and of *freedom* were dialectic tools employed in the interest of silencing these communities. Locke, Kant, Hume, and Hegel, for instance, all regarded indigenous peoples as *primitive* and intellectually inferior to Europeans by virtue of the presumption that they lacked the Enlightenment conception of *freedom*; and Hegel, further, maintained that such primitives had contributed nothing to *civilization* (Hegel 1956: 91-99).[3]

By means of both the language and enactment of colonial conquest, much of the world's population was redefined as a moral and temporal retrogression, of significance principally in modernity as a form of brute matter with which colonial enterprises could be furthered. Silence, from this colonial perspective, signified an absence of historical and cultural significance. For those signified in this manner, however, historical and cultural experiences of exploitation, conquest, genocide, or slavery reverberated ontologically, as human beings were compelled to arrive at understandings of themselves that could account for the facts of both their meaningful presence within the colonial landscape and their experience of fundamental marginalization. The result was a protraction of self-understanding. Ashis Nandy has expressed this in terms of a position of cognitive superiority made possible by the necessity, for the sake of survival, of intimately understand-

ing not only the self but the silencing colonizer. For W. E. B. Du Bois, the experience yielded a "double-consciousness," a "two-ness" born of regarding oneself both as a self and as a projection of "a world that looks on in amused contempt or pity" (Du Bois 1994: 2). The imposition of silence in this historical context did not create the vacuum implied by terms such as *civilization* nor the *primitive*; rather, the silence became an ontological repository from which new human configurations emerged. Most conspicuously, this historical dialectic of silence has been implicated in a fundamental fragmentation and multiplicity within vast numbers of modern selves, selves for which, as Patrick Chamoiseau wrote in his novel *Texaco*, "One side was worth its reverse and two sides were often one side" (1997: 70).

Despite the dismantling of colonialism, the language of conquest has remained a strident tool for Western self-definition in the neo-colonial period. It resounded with particular, although predictable, force in relation to the September 2001 attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. Public discourse in the wake of these acts deployed the terms *civilization* and *modernity* interchangeably. Popular newsmagazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *US News and World Report*, and *The New Republic* printed pronouncements such as, "The worst times, as we see, separate the civilized of the world from the uncivilized. This is the moment of clarity. Let the civilized tighten up, and let the uncivilized take their chances in the game they started;"[4] or "Dividing lines of all sorts vanished in the new sense of the civilized world at bay."[5] "This is a global cultural war," one journalist wrote in the days immediately following the attacks, "pitting a pan-Islamic movement of fundamentalist extremists against the modern world and its primary cultural engine, America;"[6] while the editors of another magazine announced, "Anybody who hates modernity hates America."[7] If there was any doubt at all of the temporal displacement of the terrorists, the popular media repeatedly resolved it in more specific terms. The editors of *The New Republic*, for instance, referred to the "medieval kingdom of the Taliban;" and readers of *US News and World Report* were informed that the terrorists and their supporters were "living in the 12th century or the sixth."[8]

Moral designations, in addition to those that were temporal, abounded through a widespread invocation of the relationship between the civilized/modern world and *freedom*. "Anybody who hates freedom," the above mentioned editors added, "hates America," echoing a sentiment that was expressed repeatedly by the nation's President,[9] for whom "freedom and democracy [were] under attack."[10] In the days that followed the attacks, the terrorists were repeatedly called "enemies of human freedom," their actions were considered a "war" against freedom, [11] and the US was described as "freedom's home and defender." Before a joint session of Congress, the President proclaimed, further, that the "advance of human freedom, the great achievement of our time and the great hope of every time, now depends on us."[12]

According to this rhetoric, the perpetrators of the terrorist assaults were utterly lacking in modern values; they were vestiges of the past who had burst into modernity. The moral and temporal abyss was easily, though temporarily, traversed by their violent actions; but these actions, springing as they did from somewhere east of normative, civilized, modern culture, could have no influence upon the most essential nature of the victims' self-understanding. Reflecting on the nature of American patriotism during the period, one journalist wrote: "Unlike most traditional forms of patriotism, ours does not center directly on the land: the 'spacious skies' and 'amber waves of grain' are more about the idea of unlimited possibility and material bounty. . . . "[13] According to the nation's President, this form of patriotism based upon unhindered mobility and economic activity was not altered by the attacks: "They want us to stop our lives. . . . They want us to stop flying and they want us to stop buying, but this great nation will not be intimidated by the evildoers."[14]

Yet, in the midst of this confident public vibrato that pitted authentic modernity against its dubious intruders, another discourse was also emerging, signaled in the first instance by a distinct public sense that *everything had changed.*[15] What became all too obvious in the weeks that followed September 11th was that, as Mircea Eliade warned, the historical event could not be fully grasped in terms of the assertion that *it happened that way*: a conventional historical explanation was not, in this instance, capable of providing a reprieve from the "terror of history" (1959: 150). As one national newsmagazine described it, "fear [was] loose in the land."[16] "First the deadly planes, now the deadly spores," the editors of *The New Republic* lamented, "This is not the world into which we expected to bring our children;"[17] while the covers of newsmagazines made various pronouncements like, "The Terror Threat at Home," "After Fear," and "A New State of Fear."[18] Six contaminated letters, seventeen confirmed cases of anthrax, and four deaths later, the headlines read, "Death by Mail: The Terrifying Anthrax Maelstrom has America on Edge," "Anthrax: A Spreading Scare," and "High Anxiety: Are Anthrax Scares Just the Beginning?"[19] This was not an ordinary kind of fear, but one for which America was overwhelmingly ill-prepared. *Senseless, unimaginable, crazy, unfathomable* were the words that infiltrated people's language[20] as much of the nation found itself in a contingent kind of state that until then had been, for mainstream America, the stuff of fiction. "Every moment everyone felt fear," Sinclair Lewis wrote in 1935, "nameless and omnipresent. They were as jumpy as men in a plague district. Any sudden sound, any unexplained footstep, any unfamiliar script on an envelope made them startle; and for months they never felt secure enough to let themselves go, in complete sleep" (1935: 10). This was the sort of fear that emerged from the terrorist attacks; and it moved out from fiction to fact in a surprisingly short time. This fear, I submit, was not superfluous. It was a potentially defining condition, best understood as religious and, more specifically, as profoundly ontological.

Rudolph Otto's (1958) configuration of the numinous as that which evokes not only awe (*mysterium fascinans*) but terror (*mysterium tremendum*) may well have been a primary operative experience here: fear that is "more than ordinary fear" (Long 1963: 6), resulting from a confrontation with "an overwhelming superiority of power" (Eliade 1961: 9). The hierophany, wrote Eliade, is a manifestation of such sacred power that intrudes upon otherwise homogenous space (1961: 20-21). In the context of its revelatory mode, the dread that is evoked by its absolute alterity of the sacred is essentially a terror at the prospect of a consummate loss of order or, in ontological terms, of *nothingness* (Eliade 1961: 64). The destruction of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center and the other violent eruptions and threats that followed, created a context in which a fear of chaos and nothingness took hold of the American public—a fear tangibly focused on what had, up until then, resided in the realm of fantasy. In his essay "Here is New York," written a half century earlier, E. B. White had prophetically mused: "a single flight of planes, no bigger than a wedge of geese can quickly end this island fantasy, burn the towers, crumble the bridges, turn the underground passages into lethal chambers, cremate the millions."[21] In the Fall of 2001, the content of such shadowy musing became distinctly possible.

The fundamental threat of non-being, experienced as a *mysterium tremendum*, is common to all human communities and defines a situation of crisis in which one modality of being is giving way to another (Long 1963: 9). The sacred, as both the underlying source of the experience and the repository of possible new modes of being, represents what Eliade called a "wholly different order;" but this alterity can generally be apprehended only through symbolic representation within the forms of the world (Eliade 1961: 11; Long 1963: 8). It is by means of a confrontation with the symbols through which the sacred reveals itself that we come to an awareness of some aspect of being, that we reflect upon the world, and that we are consequently able to make ontological statements (Eliade 1961: 21). Such statements represent our understanding of what it means to occupy the material world in a meaningful fashion,[22] and in the absence of such reflection, our ontologies ring hollow. In the vacuum in which authentic confrontation with the symbol fails to occur, life, as a meaningful enterprise, can be reduced to something as vapourous as the capacity to *fly and buy*.

II

It's the beginning of October, Wednesday. My daughter and I are visiting Manhattan, and have decided to go to the World Trade Center site. Like our friends who live in the city, we're wary of the subway in the wake of what are now euphemistically being referred to as *recent events*, and we resolve to take a cab as far as we can into Lower Manhattan. At 3:00 in the afternoon, we begin a process of fruitless waving for a cab, which lasts until 5:00 when we realize that

the drivers are generally observing the mayor's request that they avoid the disaster site. Intending to take a bus tomorrow afternoon we head back to our hotel, where the lobby has been cleared and we are instructed to wait outside while an employee vacuums an unidentified white powder that someone has dropped on the carpet.

4:15, Thursday. We're riding a city bus along Broadway—the single bus, we have discovered, that still goes as far as Canal Street. Numbered streets turn to named ones as we ride southward toward Canal. Forty-five minutes later we disembark and head toward the World Trade Center, fifteen blocks away.

> The light was departing. . . .
> . . .
> [as I] prepared myself to face the double war
> of the journey and the pity, which memory
> shall here set down. . . .
> (Dante 1954: II, 1-6)

We pass fairly easily through the military roadblock. The soldiers are concerning themselves with inspecting vehicles and personal identifications of the few selected drivers permitted to pass through. The quiet in those first few blocks is unnerving. Muffled voices; the engines of sporadic military and police vehicles; their tires—and our own soles—splashing along the wet street and sidewalk are noticeable interruptions.

Franklin Street. Leonard Street. Worth Street. Helicopters rattle over our heads and we stop, along with a few others, to look up. There are photos on walls, and corner posts, and scaffolding, displaying wedding days, birthday parties, camping trips, proud fathers, young lovers, graduates. All smiling, some laughing. All MISSING SINCE SEPTEMBER 11, torn, fading from three weeks of swampy air. In some of the buildings work has resumed and we are meeting people in business clothes, wearing industrial masks over their mouths and noses. Thomas Street. Reade Street. Chambers Street. More water. McDonald's is OPEN FOR BUSINESS and we step inside. The place is hazy. Someone orders an ice cream and the freezing machine malfunctions, spewing its melted contents over the head and torso of a young employee. She stands transfixed for half a minute, starts to sob, runs toward the back, and the manager calls out for assistance. No one moves. The only sound is drifting forward from the fryers and grills behind the ice cream freezer, where the explosion of vanilla has gone unnoticed. We walk back out onto Broadway. Warren Street. Murray Street. The smell of charred stuff is thick, and we pause at the startling acridity.

> . . . And here the stink
> thrown up by the abyss so overpowered us

that we drew back . . .
(Dante 1954: XI, 3-5)

Park Street. Barclay. The air is yelloworange. Vesey. The temperature has risen noticeably in the space of one block.

Almost by accident—we seem to have forgotten where we're going—we're staring at what's now called *Ground Zero*. Zero. Nothing. For a moment neither of us knows what to look for. The sun is starting to dip and we struggle to adjust our eyes to the lack of direct light in this empty space. At the margins of the site, a large fragment of gnarled steel is perched at a 45 degree angle, streams of smoke rising behind it. We flinch at the unexpected ignition of a pool of halogen lights that throws a group of figures into sudden relief against the whiteness. These rescuers, obviously poised to work through the night, have been sifting through the debris out of our focus, struggling still to discover some palpable evidence of human life. Three thousand people are buried in front of us, in this Ground that's called Zero. *Nothing*? The tattered icons posted along Broadway recall lives lost, families wounded, hopes dashed. But here at Zero there is presence, not memory.

Who could describe, even in words set free
of metric and rhyme and a thousand times retold,
the blood and wounds that now were shown to me.

At grief so deep the tongue must wag in vain;
the language of our sense and memory
lacks the vocabulary of such pain.
(Dante 1954: XXVIII, 1-6)

Here, the dead are unmistakable. With every breath of orange air, I feel them crowding into my chest. With every breath I feel heavier. Moving seems impossible.

"It's dark. We should get back," my daughter's voice, without taking her eyes off the lighted space. "Back where?" I ask and "what time is it?"

What are you waiting for? Why do you stare
as if you could not tear your eyes away
from the mutilated shadows passing there?
(Dante 1954: XXIX, 4-6)

We hold hands as we head back up Broadway toward Canal Street. We stop often, turning back, looking up at the helicopters buzzing through the darkness, kicking the wet sidewalk, smelling our clothes.

> And going our lonely way through that dead land
> . . .
> I mourned among those rocks, and I mourn again
> When memory returns to what I saw. . . .
> (Dante 1954: XXVI, 16-20)

III

The holy, the *numinous*, *absolute reality* (Eliade 1959: 17), *otherness* (Long 1963: 8), all variously attempt to describe the elusive modalities of the sacred. By all accounts, we are drawn back to a common property of the sacred as that which is prior to the vicissitude of existence in time and space. Its intrusion into time and space constitutes a rupture in the inconstancy of historical existence and so, although it is experienced as historical, it points to a mode of being that is not bound by temporal or spatial constraints (Eliade 1961: 11; Long 1963: 8). In the face of the sacred, human beings simultaneously experience the historically transcendent and confront our own finitude; and we come to know ourselves in relation to this transcendent reality. I am, said Abraham, "but dust and ashes."[23]

This is an awe-inspiring and terrifying arena of silent power and it makes apparent the fragility of existence in time and space—"The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me," wrote Pascal[24]—yet, the arena of the sacred is more than this. In our experience of this terrifying silence, we participate in it, move momentarily beyond the temporal and spatial into the silence that reveals itself as prior to the clamor of historical existence. For some moment, the self and history can find themselves in silent *otherness* and having so found themselves, participate in a new creation through which historical existence is re-ordered in relation to the sacred. The space in which the sacred intrudes upon existence in time and space thus becomes a place of creation or re-creation—a center of a world (Long 1999: 69; Eliade1961: 63-64; Eliade 1959: 17-18).

The World Trade Center was an icon of Western globalizing aspirations. Those who leveled the Twin Towers of the Trade Center were obviously engaged in an overwhelming act of iconoclasm directed at a society absorbed by the expansion of its own cultural values and economic interests over the entire globe. Drawing on an established vocabulary of marginalizing words—*civilized/uncivilized*, *modernity*, and *freedom*—public discourses in the wake of the attack appeared predictably capable of removing the agents of violence, both morally and temporally, from the context in which they acted, thus mitigating their critique. Still, the language could not mitigate the product of their violent critique, as a widespread sense of terror took hold of the society in spite of the discourse. This terror, I submit, was a reverberation of an ontologically contingent condition. The public invocation of a centuries-old discourse betrayed a broadly-based desire for historical constancy; but the carnage that resulted from

the transformation of four American passenger jets into guided missiles was ultimately experienced as a hierophonic break in what was thought to be homogenous space. Hierophanies, Eliade wrote, are a language about one's social and cosmic relations, in which a variety of meaningful components coalesce (1996: 450-452); and the constituent parts of this particular hierophany were wide-ranging. They encompassed an historically disjunctive relationship with the non-European world, and the violence intrinsic to the construction of modernity; fragmented modalities of human definition instigated by the colonial and neocolonial West, ontological prophets the likes of E. B. White and Sinclair Lewis, and a generalized fear for the loss of a form of global order that quite suddenly appeared to rest on tenuous foundations.

The modern West constructed itself on the bases of historical exploitation and marginalization of vast numbers of the world's people; and the public vibrato attached to the terrorists of September 11th (as well as to their supporting regimes) harkened to this epic act of silencing, in its invocation of a re-assuring mode of self-understanding. The construction of the West was enacted in history; but the silences that were created undertook an ontological meaning for those upon whom they were imposed, forcing the re-creation of the person as one defined by a distinct multiplicity. Here, *Being* evolved within the dual parameters of the knowledge of oneself as a self and the experience of objectified projection and muteness.

The West created a world in which ontological duality became a fundamental mode of existence for large numbers of people. The World Trade Center became a center of a world in September of 2001, because the culture of silencing was itself forced into an historical silence in which projection, objectification, muteness and death ("the great silence," wrote Du Bois, "that follows the jarring noises of the world" (1980: 25)) threatened to overpower. Ground Zero was an empty reverberation of this objectification. In its silence, *nothingness* loomed large. My daughter and I felt it, unmistakably, as we stood before the site. We later recalled also a kind of fragmentation—a sense of losing our grip on ourselves, as we had known ourselves before we stepped onto the city bus, and sinking into the nameless and faceless projection of some much larger project. Neither of us could move in this amorphous condition, but were able to turn from the site only when, like James Joyce's Gabriel, we discerned the "the wayward and flickering existence" of the dead within the silence (1991: 152).

In the wake of the terror of 9/11, it was not surprising that the language of conquest was invoked to restore confidence. The discourse of fear, however, pointed to the prospect of something new. In undergoing the possibility of nothingness, the culture of silencing was confronted with the contingency of its own confidence, and thrust for a moment into the modern world it created: a place where souls are multiplied, where selves undergo the amplification that comes of knowing oneself antithetically through one's own and an *other's* eyes.

> It is a hard thing to live haunted by the ghost of an untrue dream; to see the wide vision of empire fade into real ashes and dirt; to feel the pang of the conquered . . . (Du Bois 1994: 47-48)

Notes

1. Also cited in Long (1999: 67).
2. Also cited in Long (1999: 67).
3. See Kunnie (2003) as well. Hegel speaks specifically of Africans.
4. Lance Morrow, "The Case for Rage and Retribution," *Time* Special Issue (September 11, 2001).
5. Kenneth Auchincloss, "We Shall Overcome," *Newsweek* Special Report (September 24, 2001), p.22.
6. John Leo, "A War of Two Worlds," *US News and World Report* (September 24, 2001), p.47.
7. "It Happened Here," *The New Republic* (September 24, 2001), p.11.
8. "War," *The New Republic*, (October 22, 2001), 9; Leo, "A War of Two Worlds," p. 47.
9. "Freedom itself was attacked this morning by a faceless coward, and freedom will not be defeated," were among George Bush's first words following the attacks. Bush is quoted in Evan Thomas, "A New Date of Infamy," *Newsweek* Extra Edition: America Under Attack, p.26.
10. Bush is quoted in Sharon Begley, "The Toll on our Psyche," *Newsweek* Extra Edition: America Under Attack, p.42.
11. Bush is quoted in Jonathan Alter, "The Leaders: Succeeding When it Matters Most," *Newsweek* Commemorative Issue, 2001, p.66; and Howard Fineman, "A President Finds His True Voice," *Newsweek* Special Report (September 24, 2001), p. 52.
12. Fineman, "A President," 52; Alter, "The Leaders," p. 66.
13. Jonathan Alter, "Patriotism," *Newsweek* Commemorative Issue, 2001, p. 80.
14. Associated Press, "Bush Heads to China," *Lewiston Sun Journal* (October 18, 2001), A5.
15. Kenneth Auchincloss, "Back on Our Feet," *Newsweek* Commemorative Issue, 2001, p. 15; Jay Tolson, "After a Shared National Tragedy, What Comes Next?" *US News and World Report* (September 24, 2001), p. 50.
16. "After Fear," *The New Republic* (October 29, 2001), p. 9.
17. "After Fear," p. 9.
18. *US News and World Report* (October 22, 2001); *The New Republic* (October 29, 2001).
19. *US News and World Report* (October 29 and November 5, 2001); *Newsweek* (October 22, 2001).

[20] "It Happened Here," p. 10.

[21] Cited in Lisa Stein, "A Month, An Eternity," *US News and World Report* (October 22, 2001), p. 56.

[22] I am paraphrasing here, based on Philip P. Arnold's definition of religion as "how people meaningfully inhabit the material world." See Arnold (2003).

[23] Gen. 18:27; cf Eliade (1961: 10).

[24] See Pascal, "From a Knowledge of Man to a Knowledge of God;" cited in Long (1999: 61).

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