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# SACRED PRESENCE - PERSONS, PLACE AND COMMUNION

## Sacrificing communal and interpersonal worship so as to sing the Lord's song in a strange land

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### ABSTRACT

At the time of writing this paper, leading evangelical and Roman Catholic Christians were beginning a legal challenge to the prohibition of communal worship during a period when Covid-19 infection rates were rising dramatically. Their arguments are considered in this paper. What is striking from the reports of their actions is the striking absence of what I call 'the sacred' amidst their considerations. Through a largely personal narrative outworking of Rudolf Otto, and then more traditional expository consideration of Martin Buber and John Zizioulas, I look at 'the sacred' in worship from a number of perspectives. I then advance the proposition that 'the sacred' is so crucial in worship that intentional fasting from, and sacrifice of, communal interpersonal worship, is the decision that Christians must make if 'the sacred' is not to be brought into disrepute.

### KEYWORDS

Holiness; Otto; Buber; Zizioulas; sacred; Covid-19; presence; worship

## Introduction

This paper<sup>1</sup> is a discursive approach to address a number of questions for contemporary thinking and practice arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. Insights from Otto, Buber and Zizioulas on the experience of the sacred in worship will be contrasted with the approach of those who contended for the right to continue public worship, even at the risk of infection spread. I will not be presenting a complete argument but rather a perspective on the sacred and on sacrifice that has largely not been addressed by churches.

I will present the view that churches have institutionally lost a perspective on the sacred within worship. To help demonstrate this, I will show that arguments that contended for in-person worship during the Covid-19 pandemic lacked a visible expression of, or perspective upon, on the sacred. I will then offer a reflection on three seminal thinkers from a former generation, Rudolf Otto, Martin Buber and John Zizioulas, to show how apprehension of the sacred, the real presence of persons and the incarnation of Divine unity are fundamental to worship.

Consideration of these will lead me to suggest that intentionally foregoing these in favour of online worship represents a genuine sacrificial offering for Christians who, as a consequence must, perforce of Covid-19 restrictions, sing the Lord's song in a strange land.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Appreciation is expressed to Prof Stephen Pattison for helpful email exchanges on material in this paper.

<sup>2</sup>A term borrowed from Psalm 137, verse 4.

## A ban on in-person worship

On 12 and 13 January 2021, Scottish daily newspapers carried news that church leaders were pressing Scotland's First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, to lift the ban on public worship that her government had imposed upon faith communities in the light of rising Covid-19 infection rate. Calum Petrie reported in the Aberdeen-based *Press and Journal* that 'Hundreds of Scottish church leaders' were warning that the ban 'may be unlawful'.

In part, the church leaders were complaining that the ban on public gatherings for acts of worship was more restrictive than was the case in the other three nations of the UK. It was. Petrie's article cited an open letter signed by two hundred of the country's church leaders that called for an urgent re-think of the policy. Three-hundred other church leaders from around the UK also added their names to the open letter.

Signatories to the open letter, in common with those who coordinated it, came in the main from the evangelical tradition within the Christian church, though also with Roman Catholic support. Arguments within the letter revolved around a number of issues. One such was the human right for religious practice as enshrined in the European Convention of Human Rights. Also given was the view that Christian worship 'is an essential public service, and especially vital to our nation in a time of crisis'. Clearly indicating the option that a legal challenge might follow was consideration that preventing 'the gathering of the Church at this time . . . is profoundly unhelpful and unlawful'.

A signatory to the group on BBC Radio 4's *Sunday* programme on 31 January 2021 added the need for in-person worship to enable the sacraments of 'the Lord's Supper' and 'Baptism' to be celebrated.

A week or so before the open letter (as reported in *The National* on 12 January 2021), Scotland's National Clinical Director, Jason Leitch, had told the Scottish Parliament's Covid-19 Committee that Scotland's 'contact-tracing data showed a total of 120 Scots attended church or other places of worship while infectious with coronavirus over a seven-day period'.

In fairness, not all Christian denominations backed the open letter. A spokesman for the Church of Scotland (as reported in the *Press and Journal*) said, 'We accept the latest Covid pandemic restrictions mean we have to close churches again at a time when everyone is being encouraged to stay at home'. Whilst the spokesperson also said that 'communal worship is an essential element of our faith', it would appear that the Church of Scotland's position was based on a sense of solidarity with the national requirement not to travel, or leave home, unless absolutely essential and not to mix with other households beyond the minimum permitted. 'This is one way that we can contribute to suppressing the virus', the spokesperson continued.

The Scottish Episcopal Church's Bishop of St Andrews, Dunkeld and Dunblane, the Right Reverend Ian Paton, voiced a similar sentiment in a Pastoral Letter of 18 January 2021 to the clergy of his Diocese:

Some strident voices have been heard demanding that the Government should allow churches to stay open for worship. Attending worship and attending to wellbeing are closely related, they argue, and rightly. But does that mean privileging places of worship over concert halls or sports grounds? All contribute to wellbeing, but all could potentially lead to transmission of the virus.

Interestingly and helpfully, Bishop Paton introduced a theological motif into his reasoning and continued:

Christmas and Epiphany celebrate the Incarnation, God with us as a human being among human beings. I think this means that the Church, the Body of Christ, is called to identify with the precautions demanded by Lockdown, not seek to stand above them.

In this second lockdown, as in the first, we have to offer witness and service to society by having to worship and minister in a different way. We have gained much experience, which gives us confidence for the task. We have learnt that ‘Stay at Home’ need not mean ‘Stay away from Church’. We have discovered how to do on-line and on-paper worship, and to try and include everyone. The [Scottish Episcopal Church] has developed and continues to offer online Eucharistic worship at 11.00am on Sundays ... [and] ... number of churches also offer local worship online ...

We can see that, developed in these perspectives, were the paradigms of the ‘right to in-person public worship’ and the legality or otherwise of imposing a ban upon it based on Covid-19 spread precautions set against the contrary paradigm of the church acting in solidarity with other closed institutions and the restriction upon public freedom to travel and congregate.

The proponents of the open letter clearly considered that any right to conduct in-person worship was superior to any responsibility they had to reduce and keep viral transmission rates low. Even if the banning of in-person worship were found to be unlawful, having been tested in court, the question would still remain as to whether exercising the permissive right to such worship was morally just and responsible.<sup>3</sup>

## Legal challenges in England

*The Times* newspaper of 25 January 2021 narrated successful challenges in England by church leaders, which had persuaded the Westminster government to permit in-person worship. As I understand the situation in the Church of England, the decision whether to open for communal in-person worship is made locally.

At the heart of the decision in England, ‘Embedded into the English legal system and dating back more than 800 years is the constitutional right of all peoples to attend a place of worship’. The same article in *The Times* continued, ‘[In 2020] legal challenges brought these arguments to the courts, stating that the government’s restrictions on places of worship were disproportionate to human rights law and could not be legally justified on the evidence available’.

Physical attendance at church was given as essential for ‘confessional Christian faith [and] the Church as an institution [to] faithfully exist’.

However, this more permissive approach in England may not have helped those on the ground left with the responsibility of local decision-making. In the *Church Times* on 11 January 2021, cases were cited where local Church of England clergy and their churchwardens (i.e. the senior elected officers in a local parish church) might be of differing minds as to whether to open for in-person worship or not. The potential for

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<sup>3</sup>A first submission for Judicial Review by the Court of Session in Edinburgh was lodged on, or shortly after, 21 January 2021.

discord was real, not least if positions were adopted according to deeply held convictions and principle. Such might include, for example, ‘the God-given right to worship’ and ‘public worship as a civic duty for the common good’ and the need for Christians to ‘congregate’ and so on.

Clearly, the physical act of going to a place for public worship is a lifeline for many people isolated in loneliness. This is particularly so for people without internet access or no capacity to secure such. Those clergy who have regularly telephoned around their congregations, during the pandemic, as well as those who write letters and notes (in the traditional way with paper) are to be commended for having kept these lifelines open. In the long term, it may be realised that personal actions such as these, along with the novelty of online worship and online ‘coffee hours’ helped keep their churches viable during a time when the virus pandemic was to prove a bigger and more immediate threat to Christian faith and practice than secularisation.

Taken together, all the sentiments of maintaining in-person worship seem to come down to the simple common denominators of the legal right to worship (whether legally justified) and the duty of Christians (in the case of Christian faith) to do so.

All these sentiments seem to me to be based on various gradations of principle, pragmatism and legal justification.

The arguments based on principle broadly follow the line that God commands His people to meet together for worship. This is to enable sacraments to be celebrated and shared. It also follows that when people pray, and pray together communally, their prayers are beneficial for God’s world and those who inhabit it.

The pragmatic arguments can be variously given as the beneficial outcomes for the common good when people pray together in public, the maintenance of viable congregational life and resourcing brought about by persons meeting together through worship that sustains their life and witness, and with this is the beneficial outcome of people meeting together simply to talk and engage with others when otherwise opportunities for necessary human interactions are restricted.

The legal arguments are, I suggest, more crude. If there is an historic right for people to engage in public worship (even during a time of rapid and rampant viral spread), which can be vouched in the civil courts, it does not follow that churches and Christian congregations are thereby given unquestioned freedom so to conduct worship and thus risk viral spread – even if such transmission is much reduced in the normally well-ventilated churches of the nation.

It seems to me that these arguments demonstrate that something is seriously missing in the way worship is understood. What I believe has been lost sight of is the *sacredness* of the place where worship takes place as well as the *sacredness* that comes with the real presence of people meeting together for that worship.

Whilst no-one can deny the presence of the sacred in online worship, it does seem to me that experience of the sacred is a given within in-person worship, and is so fundamental, that intentionally foregoing it represents deliberate sacrifice on the part of Christians. Such sacrifice is morally responsible in the face of pandemic infection threat. Sacrifice like this is commendable on the part of Christians within society. And, crucially, it does not make the sacred an occasion of disrepute were there to be infection spread within and from communal worship.

It is to develop thoughts in this direction that the remainder of this essay will shortly be directed. Seminal writers from another era, Martin Buber, Rudolf Otto and John Zizioulas will guide us in this trajectory. But before that, a brief interlude to help set the scene.

In the *Church Times* article I referred to above, its author, the Ven Mark Ireland, Archdeacon of Blackburn (England) wrote, 'Christian worship is sacramental, witnessing to the God who took flesh and blood for our salvation, and involves being able to taste and see'. Ireland continued, 'Physicality is at the heart of our faith. As we share in the body of Christ, we become the body of Christ. This needs physical expression, and, in times of crisis, we need the assurance of the sacraments more than ever'. However, simply put these words recognise the sacredness of real physical presence.

In what he says, Ireland is stating a profound theological truth. Physicality and the contemporary gathering of Christians are essential to worship. Whilst those behind the open letter might not deny this, their presentation of the 'right to worship' lacked substantive theological content by failing to recognise *sacredness as central to worship*. Intentional sacrifice foregoing worship is thus a real sacrifice in the Christian tradition of self-giving of denying desire. Insisting on the right to worship, irrespective of circumstance, is not.

We begin with Rudolf Otto (1869–1937).

### The idea of the holy<sup>4</sup>

This is the title of Otto's most famous work. Originally published in German in 1917 as *Das Heilige*, it received the first published appearance (with many reprints following) in English in 1923.

Otto's concern was the human experience of the 'holy'. He distinguishes that which is holy from our subjective experience of it. The 'holy', to which he gives the name the 'numinous', has objective reality and is not to be reduced or equated with our experience or feeling of it. Nonetheless, it is through our subjective awareness that we experience the holy as it impacts upon our conscious experience.

Whilst eschewing any attempt to reduce the numinous, that which is holy, to subjective feeling alone he applies rational criteria associated with human feeling to give meaning to the numinous, the holy. This he does through illustration, comparison with other religions (for which he has high regard), as well as copious use of analogy to characterise this awareness of the holy.

Through it all, none of these categories can ever fully encompass that which is their object. At the end of the day, the 'holy' is 'wholly other', but not so 'wholly other' as to be beyond human experience and rational explication. However, whilst rational analysis can identify correspondence between experience one has of the holy, the numinous, there will always be a surplus beyond human rationality in the holy itself. Otto terms this, 'non-rational'.<sup>5</sup> It is this which defines the holy as 'objective'.

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<sup>4</sup>Rudolf Otto, trans John W. Harvey, Oxford University Press, 1973.

<sup>5</sup>Whilst Otto equated the term 'supra-rational' as an equivalent to 'non-rational' at the start of his book, for the remainder of it he used the term 'non-rational'. It is with his term that we shall remain though my personal preference would be the former.

A personal narrative of my own, in the manner of Otto's depictive phenomenology, will illustrate how he uses analogy to demonstrate the difference between personal subjective experience as contrasted with the 'feeling' one has of that objective reality, the holy.

Some friends wished to take my wife and I to the opera as a gift. It was to see Tosca. They drove us from Edinburgh to Glasgow and, together, the four of us had a car-picnic they had prepared. It was winter so we remained in the vehicle. I had never been to the opera before so the experience was totally novel, as was viewing it from just about the highest seat in the theatre.

Musically, I am as absolutely tone-deaf as are those who are colour-blind to the point of only being able to see simple shades of grey in the visible colour spectrum. I have little understanding of what music is and no knowledge of how composition works or how instruments are played. I admire theatre lighting and set design but have no comprehension as to how each of these are attuned to the performance on stage. Likewise, my acting skills are best described as rudimentary.

I have, however, been many, many, times to theatre for plays, musical theatre, and more recently ballet and further opera.

On none of these occasions have, I experienced anything like that evening with Tosca. Nor can I give any account that would explain why I had the experience that I did have. But I do know that I had a very particular experience and that it was quite unlike any other I have experienced in theatre at any time. What was it?

As the performance progressed, I became aware of being both totally transfixed by what was happening and being transported to a place I had never been to before. Nor has such happened since. As what I am recounting took place some thirty-five years ago, I have long forgotten at what part of the performance I had this experience. But it was real and, as I recall, it lasted some five minutes. In short, I cannot identify why it happened or what might have led to, or caused, it on that particular occasion to the exclusion of all other times I have spent in theatres.

I was aware then, and still attest, that this was an aesthetic experience and no more than that. *It did not* lead me to experience what Otto calls a sense of awe, majesty, finitude, dread, fear and many other aspects of experience he cites, such as characterise one's feeling of God. What happened that evening before Tosca did not change the course of my life in any perceptible way, though it has given an agreeable memory that I am now pleased to share.

It was an experience, and to repeat, an aesthetic experience, that corresponds to but is not the same as an experience of the holy. Nor is the holy to be reduced to such an experience as the one I have described, or to any others like it. An experience of what Otto calls the 'holy' is for him, to 'feel' the holiness of God. Such a feeling induces responses that are quite different from any subjective, aesthetic, experience, such as the one I described above.

Again, I will venture a personal narrative that tracks the form and style of Otto's analysis. I do this simply to give an example at the level of first-person testimony. In such a way this gives immediate reality to what would otherwise have to be metaphysical outworking in the third-person. My justification in taking this

approach is to show the validity of what Otto writes. If the 'holy' can be 'felt' at the level of personal experience, and the emotions and responses, which it evokes can be spoken of and articulated by one who knows of them through experience, then it is good that they should be.

In my early twenties, I considered, admittedly for only a very short period of time, the possibility of a calling to the monastic life. Although not a Roman Catholic, I visited and stayed at Mount St Bernard Abbey, a Cistercian monastery near Coalville in Leicestershire, England. As part of that visit I was, very unusually for a guest, admitted to the monastic enclosure and to join the monks in their stalls at worship.

On my second and final evening during Compline in that great abbey church, the lights dimmed and a spotlight picked out the simple rood cross hanging above the altar. In that moment, and while the *Salve Regina* was intoned, I had an experience of what Otto termed the holy, the 'numinous'. It was like no other experience I had had before, though others have since.<sup>6</sup>

In that encounter, I felt the sense of the awe-inspiring majesty of God, of God's utter transcendence in contrast to my own inferior and worthless immanence, of God's utter sinlessness and of my own yearning to be free of all sin.

I could continue, but this shortened list will suffice. What is necessary to stress is that although I was aware of God in these terms at no point did I feel God was wholly 'wholly other' from me. Even in God's transcendence, and I in my mortality, there was correspondence between what I was experiencing and who God was. There was, in Otto's terms a rational feeling of that which was, in itself, both rational and, citing Otto again, 'non-rational'. I had, in short, an experience of the holy, the numinous. I can understand from within my experience that which Otto describes so eloquently.

It was different in kind and degree from the aesthetic experience that accompanied Tosca that evening in Glasgow. For though there is correspondence between the two, my aesthetic experience in the theatre did not lead me to any realisation of dependence upon any objective reality beyond my immediate experience. At Mount St Bernard Abbey I knew, beyond doubting, the objective reality to which I was already bound and henceforth would continue to be.<sup>7</sup>

How does all this relate to the subject of this paper, namely post-Covid in-person worship? First, the aesthetic experience of the theatre, though having points of correspondence with experience of the 'holy', is fundamentally different from it (*contra* Bishop Paton above). The aesthetic experience analogically helps to describe what the experience of the 'holy' is like partly by similarity though more fundamentally by dissimilarity. In the aesthetic, there is no sense (or at best, only marginal sense) such as denotes the feeling of encounter with God's holiness. It is similar only in so far as one has an experience that takes one beyond oneself. One is not taken, so to speak, into the arms of God, though, having said that, I recognise there may be a pointer that shows the way for an experience of the holy that goes beyond the aesthetic.

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<sup>6</sup>It is interesting that should taken place whilst the *Salve Regina* was being sung as I have no particular Mariological adherence.

<sup>7</sup>I should perhaps make clear that at the time I had not heard of Rudolf Otto so was not in any way accommodating my noumenal experience to something that I had previously and favourably read.



Worship of God is different. Within worship, one experiences through attentive seeing and listening the words of scripture read by a person whose demeanour one can see or sense, of whose anxieties one might be aware of, and from whose encouragement in faith one might well have recently benefitted.

Likewise in preaching, one does not just see and hear a sermon. One experiences the in-person struggle of the 'less than the best' preacher reaching for the right words to say and maybe not finding them. One might experience the crowd-swaying gift of the talented scriptural orator. One may have reservations about what one has heard, might it be manipulative, wrongly enticing and so on.<sup>8</sup>

And for those denominations where sacramental actions are significant, one can experience the liturgy of, say, the holy communion where, in most circumstances, a set formulary is followed such that it becomes a rhythm of prayer and action into which the believer is taken through a repetition, which is enacted whether in word or action or both.

There may also be another dimension. I can explain. Not too many years ago, I had the privilege of preaching and leading worship at St Thomas' Episcopal Church on New York's Fifth Avenue. This is a massive church, with a large congregation, and a majestic choir. At the east end of the church is an utterly enormous reredos, some seventy feet high, comprising statuary and ornamentation in the high gothic tradition of church architecture. Facing this reredos one cannot fail but to be impressed by its scale. However, it was only while I was seated in the Bishop's *Cathedra* (a rare privilege of the episcopal office I hold and one I have never taken for granted) and looking at this reredos from the side that I became aware of its extraordinary three-dimensional structure. From front to back, so to speak, it is very deep. Seen from the front, this is less obvious, though I have no doubt that the depth of the sculpturing adds to the front-on visual effect. But as I gazed at the reredos from close to, and what was for me a new perspective, my mind entered a reverie on the depth and hiddenness of God. Though the holiness of God can be experienced whilst gazing at the reredos from the front, as it were, further perspectives from different angles conveyed more.

Something similar can be discerned through encounters with those physical means, which humans present to one another and through which the depth of God might be experienced and felt when people gather together for communal worship.

Though I have given an illustration of this in terms of a physical structure (a particular reredos), and by inference other structure in churches, I am reminded of a wonderful old lady in a congregation I once served who always came to church with a little notebook and pencil. In the notebook, she would write down what she called a 'nugget'; in other words, something that struck her from the bible reading, from the sermon or from the liturgy of the sacrament that she could take home and keep coming back to in the week ahead. It was a nugget, a piece of gold, that she could treasure and reflect on as something from God that came to her and through which she could experience God's holiness.

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<sup>8</sup>The 'whodunnit' novel *All that glitters* by Les Cowan, Lion Fiction, Oxford, 2019, excellently, and in a very easy-to-read way, recounts malevolent manipulation by a church leader / preacher as the central narrative opening this book.

At a personal level, I owe a considerable debt to the vicar of the village church that I attended from the age of six weeks until I left home for seminary at the age of twenty. Throughout that period, I was the youngest member of that church; my mother was the next youngest. The same fourteen people attended worship outside a village population of largely de-Christianised three hundred.

That vicar, despite a somewhat acidic turn of phrase, led me to recognise the sacredness of the space in which worship took place. This sacredness began at the church gate and from there the path into church and onward to the altar. He spoke to me of it as the pathway to the holy of holies. I accept that, at the time, I heard this in very literal terms.<sup>9</sup> Since then, as the years have gone on, I have come to accept it as a rich metaphor betokening the pathway to deeper relationship to, and experience of God's sacred presence.

All that I have spoken of so far is three-dimensional. The actions of worship, the words voiced (and maybe music rendered), the structure of the place of worship, and what one may take from it. All these are all parts of the drama of in-person, three-dimensional worship that is there for one to encounter that sense of God's holiness. To recognise, as such, the *sacredness of God*. Another theologian of a former generation, John Baillie, called this the sense of the presence of God.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to note, at this juncture, that I am not saying the experience of God is *restricted* only to worship in church, even if the examples I have given suggest such. For example, and in what I suggest is the keystone section of *Wind in the Willows*, 'Piper at the Gates of Dawn', Kenneth Grahame offers an account of the experience of the numinous:

"Rat" he found breath to whisper, shaking. "Are you afraid?" "Afraid?" murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. "Afraid of *Him*? O, never, never! And yet -and yet - O, Mole I am afraid!" Then the two animals bowed their heads and did worship.

In fictional literature, this surely has to be one of the most profound expositions of what Otto was saying.<sup>11</sup>

Taking part in online worship, though necessary in the extreme times of highly infectious pandemic disease, is of its very nature two-dimensional. One sits in front of a computer screen or TV monitor. One does not have to engage with what is being offered on-screen. One can slip away, during a dull sermon, and get a cup of coffee rather than persevere with it, searching for that simple nugget of gold that might otherwise escape attention. And one can, below screen camera level, catch up with WhatsApp messages that have arrived at one's smartphone. I cannot criticise anyone for any of these for I am guilty of them all!

<sup>9</sup>I remember an argument I had with other boys in the village that climbing trees in the churchyard was wrong because it was sacred ground. They did not understand what I was talking about.

<sup>10</sup>Baillie, *The Sense of the Presence of God*.

<sup>11</sup>There is something not dissimilar, though perhaps closer to my own aesthetic narrative, in Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat*, where, also in a reverie, 'radiance' is discovered by the hard road of suffering (Chapter Ten).

My point is that online worship is two-dimensional, minimises engagement with others in worship, risks reducing worship to observation rather than participation, and minimises the likelihood of encounter with the 'holy', of the *sacredness* that comes with encounter with God. This last is experience of life in its (three-dimensional) fullness rather than in its (two-dimensional) lockdown restriction.

Likewise, and notwithstanding mention of holy communion and baptism, those who are advocating in-person worship in the current context of the pandemic have not given sufficient attention in what they have said to what I have called the sense of the presence of the 'holy' in worship. The stress upon what I characterised as 'principle', 'pragmatism' and the legal 'right to worship' have left out of account the experience of the 'holy', the *sacredness* that is God. As such, something important in theological thinking, to say nothing of liturgical importance, would appear to be diminished, if not missing altogether.

On this score, therefore, both proponents of the open letter and advocates of online worship fall at the same fence. The sense of the presence of God, through experience of God's *sacredness* is either not admitted or is reduced. Online worship risks minimising, and maybe avoiding, the commitment to attentiveness that comes with personal and interpersonal presence both with others and before God's glory.

My direction here, and this is important, must not be misunderstood.

I am *not arguing* the case against online worship. In what follows, I will come to propose that it is precisely because of the *sacredness* of the gathering with others in worship that we *can forego* such in order to avoid any contention that gathering for sacred worship has become a source of infection spread. If gathering for communal worship either risks or occasions an actual dangerous viral spread, then the believers who so gather bring worship of God into disrepute. And this should not be the case.

For the moment, we must move on and develop our thinking further. This we shall do with attention to Martin Buber's *I and Thou*.<sup>12</sup>

## I and Thou

Martin Buber (1878–1965) wrote this volume from deep within the heart of the Jewish mystical tradition. Only from within can one fully grasp the immensity of what Buber is writing for what he says is at one and the same time both immediately obvious and relevant and yet, in development through the book, it is, at times, abstractly complex and remote.

Buber's translator, Ronald Gregor Smith, correctly noted that *I and Thou* is, 'not an academic work of discursive philosophy'. It is, 'a philosophical-religious poem' belonging to, 'no single specialised class of learned work'.<sup>13</sup> Gregor Smith also recognises that the term *I and Thou* denotes relatedness between persons that betokens reverence in the relationship persons have (or can have) with God. This sentiment

<sup>12</sup>Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, first published in German in 1923; translated into English by Ronald Gregor Smith and published in the UK in 1937. The edition I have used is a 2010 reprint by Martino Publishing, Mansfield Centre, Connecticut.

<sup>13</sup>In the Introduction, v, vi. nb. All further quotation from *I and Thou* in this section will be simply by page number alone. It should be noted also that Buber's translator has followed traditional 'male gendered' inclusive language forms ('men' rather than 'people' etc). In quotation, we shall be faithful to this and, in doing so, ask the reader to make appropriate mental translation as we proceed.

correctly captures Buber's intention. Were a more modern translation of Buber to rename the book '*I and You*' (for example) the intention of reverent relation would likely be lost.

We shall proceed by looking at the principal threads of what Buber said and then outline its significance in the context of this essay.

In *I and Thou* Buber says that, to persons, the world is 'twofold'. It is so because of, 'the twofold nature of the primary words which he [ie the person] speaks'. The two primary words are not single nouns or verbs but are combined words that denote relationship. Respectively the two primary words are, 'I-Thou' and 'I-It' where, in the latter, the 'It' can be replaced by 'He' or 'She'. On this basis Buber avers that the 'I' is therefore twofold; being different in the two primary relational words, 'I-Thou' and 'I-It'.

Whenever 'Thou' or 'It' is spoken each is accompanied by the respective 'I' that pertains to each. It is this which signifies the relational nature of each primary word, 'I-Thou' and 'I-It'. Both primary words are differently 'spoken from the being'. The primary word 'I-Thou' is 'spoken with the whole being', whereas the 'I-It' can 'never be spoken with the whole being' (3). This distinction is fundamental to Buber's outworking.

It is the case for Buber that the 'I' does not exist when taken by itself. The 'I' is only 'I' when spoken in the relational primary words 'I-Thou' and 'I-It'. In this one move, Buber therefore rejects the central plank of the Cartesian *cogito* and the monadism of Leibniz and all else that might be derived from either. When the 'I' is spoken it is spoken in relation, and in respect of one of the two primary words. The existence of the 'I' is given when the 'I' is spoken and it is only always spoken in relation. But the relational nature of 'I-Thou' and 'I-It' differ. What does Buber mean by this?

A well-known example of a tree is given (7f). Characterising it by shape, size, form, scientific classification and so on objectifies the tree. It becomes known for its range of properties and is there before me as such. I can describe it by means of all of its constituent features to another person who would understand fully what I was presenting. The same is true, to use an illustration of my own, when a person's illness and its effects are described in a medical lecture without recourse to who the person is (or was, if post-mortem). The illness is presented as an objectified circumstance. The person, as the subject of that illness, is not presented.

For four years after leaving school I trained as a histopathology and cytology technician. Producing microscope slides of high quality, our laboratory sent many to Professor A. C. Lendrum at what was then still known as Queens College, Dundee. When, some years later, I became University Chaplain at the (now) University of Dundee I visited Professor Lendrum in his study/personal laboratory. We talked about the material he had in his slide files of human pathology. We did not speak of the persons from whom they had originated. They were absent from our conversation. That conversation typified Buber's 'I-It'.

The relational language of the 'I-It' is boundaried by specification, conditions, properties and reductions from the whole. As such, the relational 'I-It' is limited. The 'It' is limited and the associated 'I' is limited for the relation between the two is partial and can never be whole. Or at least, it can never be whole for it speaks only of the parts and bits of the whole

If, however, and now returning to Buber's example of the tree, we come to see the tree without disintegration of it into its component parts, we might indeed relate to it as 'I-Thou'. Related to in this way the tree 'speaks' to me in its wholeness and I to the tree in my wholeness in the primary word that relationally unites us, 'I-Thou'.

It is a mistake, following Buber, to say that I experience the tree. The primary word 'I-Thou' is a relational condition which is lost the moment one reduces, or begins to explain, it in terms of experience or feeling. Applying this to persons Buber says:

I do not experience the man to whom I say *Thou*. But I take my stand in relation to him, in the sanctity of the primary word. Only when I step out of it do I experience him once more. In the act of experience *Thou* is far away (9).

One might well ask of Buber how one can so enter into this 'I-Thou' relational meeting. What training, and what mental discipline, is required such that the tree, or the person, or whatever are met in the non-objectivising and particularising way that characterises the relational 'I-It'? In responding to this question, we come to the first fundamental paradox of Buber's poetic mysticism. For exactness, we must quote in full:

The *Thou* meets me through grace – it is not found by seeking. But my speaking of the primary word to it is an act of my being, is indeed *the* act of my being . . . The primary word *I-Thou* can be spoken only with the whole being. Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place through my agency, nor can it ever take place without me. I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say *Thou* . . . All real living is meeting (11).

Buber here is speaking of direct relation without any intervening or consequent predication. To the above, he adds, 'the real, filled present, exists only in so far as actual presentness, meeting, and relation exist. The present arises only by virtue of the fact that the *Thou* becomes present' (12).

Tempting as it is to continue an expository outworking of Buber, we must now begin to focus attention upon how this relates to the sacred and to worship. Some clues have already been given.

If the relational 'I-Thou' is spoken then it is spoken without, as we have noted, predication and without being objectified. It is an unconditional relation and thus, 'love is *between I and Thou*' (15). Putting this into both scriptural and liturgical language, we can say that because 'God first loved us', we are able to love one another. God's love is primary and in the relational exchange between persons we share and live that love with one another. To put the same thing another way, it is because we have been loved through God's primary relation with us that we can love others with that same mutual relation of love.

Tragedy, however, is part of this relational dynamic. The relational primary word that is 'I-Thou' is forever destined to become an 'It' as the love which denotes the original, primary relational term becomes characterised and populated with predicates and defined by descriptors. Unconditional love, as definitive of the relational 'I-Thou' is for ever sacrificed on the altar of human caprice and limitation; the human urge to systematise everything into a list.

In the eucharist,<sup>14</sup> the sacrifice is remembered of the one who was the love of God relationally incarnate within human life, as God voiced His own primary Word into creation. It is remembered through the enactment of taking bread and wine, and bringing into the present what Jesus did by giving himself totally for us in a supreme act of relational love.

To put this into Buber's language, God spoke His 'I-Thou' to creation through the loving Word made flesh, and relationally we receive that Word because it has come to us and can be lived by and in us in mutual relation to other persons. In other words, God's 'I-Thou' to us makes possible and becomes our 'I-Thou' in response as we live it in unconditional mutuality. Yes, principally this is in worship, but if worship is to be lived and is to be 'real life' then the 'I-Thou' that is God's primary word to us becomes our primary word to the other person.<sup>15</sup>

We may have now said enough to apply this to the worshipping pattern and tradition familiar to most. This is the weekly round (daily for some, less frequent for many others) of Sunday worship, though it need not be so as other patterns of communal, in-person, worship develop.

In such contexts people gather to hear the scriptures read, prayers offered, praises and devotions sung (or said), and in many contexts to share in the eucharist (however defined). This places the faithful Christian and the earnest seeker<sup>16</sup> in a setting where relationship with God is presented and offered, ready to be accepted.

The relationship is one whereby each person can see him or herself in what Buber would call the 'I-Thou' relationship. For true relationship in these terms, the believer's identity as person, as an 'I' is not subject over against God. Nor is God so utterly transcendent as to be so beyond the person. No, God is there, in the relational interchange (or is it 'exchange?') with persons that is denoted by the 'I-Thou'.

This is not to say that God is not transcendent, nor is it yet that the person is so utterly 'below' God and unworthy of God's grace. But the moment that God is given characteristics such as transcendent, or that the person recognises him or herself to be unworthy of God's grace then the primary word that is 'I-Thou' becomes the 'I-It' of objectified relationship.

True it is that we must recognise that not every worshipping person, or every worshipping community, lives in the relational 'I-Thou' with God. And nor does every person live in the reciprocal 'I-Thou' with every other person. Sadly, and as I write these words, I am conscious of a particularly worrying circumstance where a church institution is tearing itself apart as relations are fast deteriorating into an alarming vortex of objectifying, and thus failed, relationship.

However, the failure of persons shows ever more really that true relationship as defined in the 'I-Thou' is the necessary ground for all other interpersonal 'I-Thou'. Given that God has shown his love for us in this relational unity we are enabled to live it with one another.

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<sup>14</sup>Within this term I globally include Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant traditions, as well as all other Christian denominations and communities in between.

<sup>15</sup>I say this fully recognising that this only comes through grace (*pace* Buber) and recognising that predication of this 'I-Thou' to 'I-It' is as characteristic of human limitation in worship as it is in all other human commerce and interaction.

<sup>16</sup>In the Les Cowan novel I referred to above, the character 'Gillian' is one such. In Cowan's 'David Hildago' series of novels, the relational basis of Christian faith is presented as the foundational model.

In application to online worship, persons are denied the level of relational 'I-Thou' with one another as interpersonal contact is removed to the level of a computer interface. Relationality is objectified. Likewise, relational 'I-Thou' with God, alongside others, is mediated, largely electronically. Whilst this is a necessary expedient to avoid viral infection spread it does mean that relational 'I-Thou' is diminished in favour of objectified, relational 'I-It' through online media.

This is not to say, I must stress, that 'I-Thou' relation with God is negated. The individual person can have a unique relational 'I-Thou' with God. Though online worship diminishes the shared experience of it, it does not oblivate it.

So, to summarise, the proponents of the 'right to worship' in my first section seem not to place the sacredness of God in their petitions. With Otto, experience of the sacred through noumenal encounter is reduced. In Buber, online worship diminishes the relational 'I-Thou' of intimacy with God and other persons. Over-stressing the value of online worship risks, I suggest, making worship a more comfortable, individualised, commodity. It should not be so, even if for a time advisable. Personal sacrifice of oneself and personal encounter with God along with commitment to others should together be a principal guiding and expected norm for Christian belief, practice and searching.<sup>17</sup>

As was the case at the end of my section on Rudolf Otto, what I am urging must not be misunderstood.

My aim is to reinforce the sacredness of relation between 'I' and 'Thou'. With Otto, we considered how place and event are components (though not necessarily the only components) in experiencing the sacred in worship. With Buber, we find the sacred is expressed in terms of the primary relation 'I-Thou'. In these terms, genuine intentional sacrifice is involved when Christian worshippers deliberately accept conditions that forego gathering in places set apart for worship.

Conversely, when Christian worshippers successfully insist upon the right to worship in circumstances, such as those of the Covid-19 pandemic, they risk increasing viral infection spread. Because of potential if not actual hurt to others, as a result of gathering, then worship would be brought into disrepute. The sacred relational primary word 'I-Thou' would become a source of needless controversy amongst those in society with whom we circulate. This controversy would be avoided if worshippers exercised deliberate sacrifice by foregoing that which they cherish most, experience of sacred relation with God. The yearning to worship in the presence of God should never be the source of harm to the health and well-being of others by risking the increase in illness and possible death to say nothing of stress imposed upon those agencies who care for the sick and vulnerable.

Crucial to this is the Christian discipline of personal and intentional sacrifice. Personal sacrifice is an essential category and discipline amongst God's people. This does not just mean foregoing chocolate in Lent. When circumstance demands, it also means 'fasting'<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Bradley, *The Power of Sacrifice*, is a particularly readable and noteworthy consideration of the importance of sacrifice.

<sup>18</sup>It is important to note the way I am speaking of 'sacrifice' here. Broadly speaking, I am putting it in the same context as that given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* when, in one of its sections, it speaks of sacrifice as, 'surrender of something valued or desired for the sake of something having a higher or more pressing claim' and continuing, 'the loss entailed by devotion to some other interest'. It is from this perspective that I have linked this to the notion of 'fasting' in the sense that 'sacrificing participation in communal worship' can also be seen as a discipline of intentional abstinence.

from that which we value most dearly, sacred worship in the real presence of others. In short, sacrificing communal worship, sacrificing the relational ‘I-Thou’ with God and with others in sacred worship.

But let us not anticipate things too quickly. The time has now come to develop our thinking one stage further before coming in due course to a summarising proposition. We shall consider John Zizioulas (b.1931). He is currently Titular Metropolitan Archbishop of Pergamon in the Greek Orthodox Church after previously following an illustrious academic career in the USA, Great Britain and across Europe.

## Being as communion<sup>19</sup>

A quotation from John Zizioulas will set the scene for us:

The being of God is a relational being: without the concept of communion it would not be possible to speak of the being of God (10).

Zizioulas comes from a Greek Orthodox tradition. As an ecclesialogist, priest and theologian, his conceptual framework cannot be separated from his background. The terms in which he writes definitively reflect his sacramental orientation, his profound knowledge of patristic theology and generous ecumenical attitude to the wider Christian church.

It would be wrong to interpret his understanding of communion narrowly. He simply does not mean the eucharist. By the term, he would include the Persons of the Holy Trinity as well as the ecclesial gatherings of the church, local and global without identifying in any simplistic way any one of these with another. Zizioulas was a systematic thinker with a global concern. From what he wrote we can gather together some threads that will serve our purpose in this essay very well.

When worshippers from the very earliest Christian communities assembled to share the meal Our Lord commanded that they should, they both held in the present moment the memory of all that Jesus accomplished and looked ahead towards that which was to be. In other words, the gathering of the faithful was crucial. Zizioulas sees in this a coming together of the ‘institutional’ (what I call the ‘organised’ church, though in reality its life is haphazardly, and at times sinfully, arbitrary and perfunctory) and the ‘charismatic’. Whilst there is a difference between each, there is no division between them; no dichotomy of the one from the other.

A small, but significant, theological step can be made from this observation to the premise that the gathering of the faithful<sup>20</sup> as a community is crucial if it is to fulfil its divine vocation in response to God’s will. God wills His people to be gathered such that, simply put, their communion as the gathered *ecclesia* is the earthly instantiation of the Divine communion that is the Trinity.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Zizioulas, *Being as Communion, Studies in Personhood*. Italicised words in quotations that follow, from Zizioulas, are all his.

<sup>20</sup>Notwithstanding what I said earlier, Zizioulas considers such would be eucharistic).

<sup>21</sup>Matthew 18.20 is apposite in this regard. ‘For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them’. (NRSV) The presence is relational.



We might call this a communion of that which is objective (Divine Presence) and that which is subjective (human presence). The former is constant whilst the latter is fluid and variable.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, we must stress that the church is not a human institution, which God somehow inhabits thus rendering it holy. It is rather the case that God exercises a divine initiative rendering the church (in all its failings) the reality it is. Thus:

The [Holy] Spirit is not something that ‘animates’ a Church which already somehow exists. The Spirit makes the church *be* . . . It is not about a dynamism which is added to the essence of the Church. It is the very essence of the Church.<sup>23</sup>

In such a frame, both the local and the universal church are together mutually in their intimacy, one with the other. The category by which we understand this is ‘communion’; quite literally the coming together of those who are called to be one with God in communion and to express and live his earthly life. This is understood Christologically and Pneumatologically, ecclesialogically and eschatologically; missiologically, too, I suggest. Zizioulas again:

. . . the institution that is supposed to express the unity of the Church must be an institution which expresses *communion* . . . the institution of universal unity cannot be self-sufficient or self-explicable or prior to the event of communion; it is dependent on it (11).

The universality of the church (what Zizioulas calls her ‘catholicity’) is defined as:

a *presence*, a presence which unites into a single existential reality both what is given and what is demanded, the presence of Him who sums up in Himself the community and the entire creation by His being existentially involved in both of them (135-136).

Some threads can now be brought together. Zizioulas has stressed ‘communion’ as foundational for the church. By this, he means the gathering of faithful believers in worship as the existential reality in history that expresses the divine life of the Trinity. The question we must now ask is whether the dispersal of believers, as a consequence of pandemic closure of places of worship, to their computer screens is communion in these terms. In strict terms, the answer has to be that it is not.

This is so because the dispersal of individuals to their computer screens in worship introduces a dichotomy; it is a dichotomy that explodes the reality of personal presence and creates, in its place, individualised absence. It does so almost to the point where communion is negated. I say, ‘almost to the point’ quite deliberately, for issues, like this, raised by the pandemic are not new. The pandemic has forced upon churches a question the people of the Hebrews had to face when taken captive to Babylon; namely, ‘How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?’ and remain the faithful people of God.

Whilst Zizioulas is correct in saying that individualisation presupposes separation and division and that, ‘The person represents a category that presupposes unity with other persons’ and that the church, ‘as a *communion* can only be understood in the categories of personal existence’ (164 – 165) there are times and seasons when the church must so contrive to exist in the context of individualisation. Continuity of communion in the

<sup>22</sup>At this point I am interposing my terminology on Zizioulas. Whilst I greatly value what he writes, I nonetheless feel that Zizioulas fails to give significant attention to the flawed character of human persons in both their individuality and in their corporateness and, not least, when gathering in sacred assembly.

<sup>23</sup>Zizioulas, 24.

church is there when those who seek to gather, where and by what means they can, do so in fulfilment of the divine vocation so to do. At risk of taking Zizioulas out of context we read the following:

Our continuity [... with Christ ...] is not determined by sequence or response based on distance; it is rather a continuity in terms of *inclusiveness*: we are *in* Christ and this is what makes Him be *before* us ... (182 – 183)

As we have noted, and though Zizioulas would rightly never define the Church in terms of individualisation, through the intentional will to sacrifice in-person worship the church recognises the sacredness of its gathering so magisterially that foregoing it, for a time at least, represents genuine sacrificial surrender of that which it treasures most. The church can do so because of the ontological priority of Trinitarian presence defining its communion to be ‘in Christ’ through the prevenience of the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father.

## Summary

Those who argue for the ‘right to worship’ as I presented their position in the threefold schema of principle, pragmatism and legality are in a sense not far removed from what we have found Zizioulas to say. That the nature of the church is rooted in ecclesial communion of the faithful when gathered is not to be denied. But such a perspective must be grounded in the unity made so in this way by the ontological priority of the Trinity as the ground for all ecclesial gathering and worship. The intentional gathering of the faithful must be a sacred act and must reflect as well as embody the holiness of God, always qualified by the fallen nature of those who assemble in this way.

This, all together, is a theological fundamental. But not even claims for the sacredness of the gathered ecclesial community comprise a sufficient prerequisite to justify a demand for the right to worship irrespective of empirical circumstance. In pandemic times constraints have of necessity been placed on the sacred gathering of the faithful for the common good of those amongst whom we live. In such times, we must view the sacred gathering for worship as a joyful and essential privilege, not an absolute right.

In pandemic times God’s people have been required, exiled from those communities and places where we worship, ‘to sing the Lord’s song in a strange land’. This is something that must be joyfully accepted. This must be so, not because churches are like theatres or cinemas, but because, as the people of God, the Christian church values the sacredness of worship so much that likely, and maybe actual, risk of infection in Christian worship gatherings must not be allowed to become a vehicle for critical murmuring against the sacred and against Christian practice from within wider society.

If this, in pandemic times, means having to substitute computer screen, leaflet by post and pastoral telephone-call individualisation in place of personal presence, then it must be so for, however, long is necessary.

God does demand of those who have responded to His call the requirement to meet together as persons and by this means to share in the real presence of Our Lord in the local ecclesial midst as bread and wine are shared, as the scriptures are heard and expounded, as prayers, praises and petitions are presented.

If pandemic exile is one motif by which we might come to understand this better than to it, we can also add the call to God's faithful people intentionally to fast; *to fast and to abstain from* that which Christians hold most dear – the mutual personal gathering in communion with one another and thus in the sacred presence of God in one place and at one time.

Moral responsibility by such fasting and sacrifice, in the face of virulent infection, demonstrates the importance of the sacredness of the relation between the 'I' and the 'Thou'. It demonstrates the sense of the presence of God in worship – even if for a time fasting and abstaining from physical real presence with others in a sacred space. In such fasting and abstinence, by foregoing in-person worship the Trinity remains bound up with the church in sacred ecclesial communion in such a way that God's will remains honoured through His church's self-denial.

God's will will remain honoured as His church anticipates that moment when the fasting of sacrificial foregoing of in-person worship comes to an end and God's church, local and universal, will once again gather in His Real Presence. Until this time of trouble passes us by, therefore, God's church must learn 'to sing the Lord's song in a strange land' if the sacred is to remain sacred, and not be forgotten.

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