

Joyful Silence in the Liturgical Practices of Ghanaian Christianity

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ABSTRACT

Noise and silence are both integral parts of Christian liturgy. The focus of this paper was to carry out an appraisal of silence in the liturgical activities of Christians in Ghana and its effect on the spiritual as well as environmental health of Kumasi. Using the descriptive approach, the liturgical celebrations of some selected churches from all five strands in Kumasi Metropolis were assessed. The study revealed that silent liturgies exist among the churches in the metropolis, even though the degree of emphasis varies from one strand to another. Also, some of the strands belittle the significance of silence in the liturgy primarily due to their misunderstanding and misinterpretation of scriptures relating to noise and silence. The study thus recommends proper theological and religious education to sensitize Christians on the contextual interpretation of the Bible.

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INTRODUCTION

Noise pollution, which includes both sonic noise and visual noise, is a hazard to human health, according to the World Health Organization.¹ As such, Christians find themselves in desperate need of quiet spaces both in their personal lives and also in their corporate life together as the church. The inclusion of silence in worship, then, is not just a matter of physical well-being, it is also a matter of well-being before God.²

Yet as many Christians will attest firsthand, silence is one of the most difficult things for churches to make space for in their corporate liturgical worship. Invariably, it is poorly understood, treated perfunctorily, or seen as an interruption to fulsome praise and proclamation.

But while silence in prayer and praise of God may feel for many like anxiety-inducing dead air, it is central to faithful worship. One of the more frequent concerns expressed by many Christians and non-Christians alike is the level of talking and other noise in churches in recent decades. Many who are a bit older remember a time when to walk even into a rather full church was to walk into a realm of great silence.

Obviously, in most churches today, the days of strict silence have reduced. The change is not just in churches, but to some extent is in the wider culture as well. So, loud churches, bespeak both cultural and ecclesial trends. Liturgical noise is often created by the use of loud sound equipment that

¹ David W. Taylor, “Make a Joyful Silence Unto the Lord | CT Pastors | Christianity Today,” 2017.

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2019/october-web-exclusives/church-worship-make-joyful-silence-unto-lord.html>.

² Taylor, “Make a Joyful Silence Unto the Lord.”

projects the sounds from the church with deafening intensity. Liturgy is a word that originates from the Greek *leitourgia* which simply means *service*. When the New Testament was written, the word liturgy became the reference used by the church for its gatherings defining 'service to God and people'.³ Thus, this study defines liturgy as an order used in Christian rites.

Christian liturgical celebration or public worship may be defined as an activity or series of activities in which Christians acknowledge the sovereignty of God the Father and the Lordship of Jesus Christ through their appearance, words, songs and deeds that reflect this acknowledgment. Worship may be individual⁴ or corporate.⁵ As stated earlier, though the focus of this paper is to carry out an appraisal of silence in the liturgical activities of Christians in Ghana and its effect on the spiritual as well as environmental health of Kumasi, its outcome would apply to the general Ghanaian context.

The Concept of Liturgy

According to Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, Liturgy in a broader setting refers to the order of life which is narrowed down to the order of the worship service.⁶ It includes all activities of a worship service.⁷ There seems to be a strong link between the structure of daily activities and the liturgy of a worship service. In a worship service, the daily activities of congregants are brought together alongside the larger narrative of the Bible.⁸

Pieterse refers "to the four liturgical tensions as an expression of the existential reality, namely between being and becoming, between time and space, between awe and expression and between laughter and lament."⁹ He then concludes that "if liturgy is also meant to be a liturgy of life (liturgy on the street), then *existentialia*, like these, should surely be brought into view and into liturgical consideration."¹⁰ The liturgy of worship ought to be linked and shaped alongside the daily life and realities of congregants. Coenraad Josephus Calitz posits that singing done during the church service is always linked to the liturgy. In the same vein, the liturgy of the service should reflect the *existentialia* of the congregants.¹¹ Thus, singing in church is determined by the setting and time.

According to Calitz, Schelling and Strydom, there are definite motives for the liturgy of the worship service. These motives can be classified in line with scriptures, ecumenism, confession, pastoral and reconciliation.¹² In line with the purpose of this study, it is necessary to point out that a worship service should include a pastoral motive. The three authors mentioned above posit that worship services are not only for the congregants but are also services to the congregants where they are developed holistically.

It is remarkable, however, that no real study based upon a behavioural approach has been made of what people experience when they attend one or other form of service and what factors affect their experiences. This lack of information means that different actors on the ecclesiastical scene can more easily project their wishful thinking into the liturgy. It can be claimed that the service provides meaning, security, and a sense of closeness or that symbols or gestures, communion, or the position of

³Joseph S. Gelineau, "Music and Singing in the Liturgy," in *The Study of Liturgy*, ed. Cheslyn Jones (London: Oxford University Press, 1992), 117.

⁴ Cf. Romans. 12:1-5.

⁵ Cf. 1 Corinthians. 11-14.

⁶ *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains. Vol. 2 Indices* (United Bible Soc., 1989) 17.

⁷A.C. Barnard, "Die Besondere Betekenis van Die Psalms in Die Christelike Kerk," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 21, no. 2 (2000): 214-27.

⁸ H. J. C Pieterse, *Prediking in 'n Konteks van Armoede* (Universiteit van Suid-Afrika, 2001).

⁹ Pieterse, *Prediking in 'n Konteks van Armoed*.

¹⁰ Pieterse, *Prediking in 'n Konteks van Armoed*.

¹¹Coenraad Josephus, Calitz, "The Free Song (Hymn) as a Means of Expression of the Spirituality of the Local Congregation with Specific Focus on the Situation of the Dutch Reformed Church in South-Africa" (University of Pretoria, 2011), 56.

¹² Calitz, "The Free Song (Hymn)."; P. Schelling, *Muziek En Kerkewerk* (Gravenhage: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum BV, 1989); Wessel Marthinus Louwrens Strydom, "Liturgiese Sang in Diens van Die Vernuwings van Die Gereformeerde Erediens" (University of the Orange Free State, 1991), 12.

the altar create the prerequisites for experiencing the holy or sacred. However, this is something that is assumed, hoped for, or presumed. From an academic point of view, the field is theoretically diffused and has an empirical lacuna.

Liturgical Silence

Liturgical Silence is an important aspect of worship as there are lots of areas during worship service where silence is observed. Silence is a nonverbal means of communication. Silence may be kept as an offering to God thus suggesting to organists the need to use silence as a conscious and positive act of worship. The early church cherished silence in worship service, therefore while waiting for the whole congregation to assemble, Christians in earlier times had either sung or read to them other religious or scriptural material. They spent that time in quiet meditation. This is not evident in contemporary times where some worshippers engage in unnecessary conversation during worship forgetting they are in the presence of the Holy and must accord Him due respect and reverence by observing some silence. Some also use their cell phones which causes a distraction during church services.

Silence and Joyful silence from the Biblical Perspective

Silence can be defined as the absence of ambient audible sounds, “the emission of sounds of such low intensity that they do not draw attention to themselves.”¹³ It is also “the state of having ceased to produce sounds. This latter sense can be extended to apply to the cessation or absence of any form of communication, whether through speech or other media.”¹⁴

According to David W. Taylor, silent worship is also a form of worship to God which He commands at certain times. In Psalm 46:10, the command is to “be still.” In Zeph 1:7 the command to be silent before the Lord is also observed, the same as in Prov. 30:32 “Put your hand on your mouth.” Also in Is. 41:1, the Lord asks His people to listen in silence. This goes to posit that one can only listen to God in silence.¹⁵ Taylor goes on to state that this is a model that Christians ought to follow. In Ps 62:5 the Psalmist says that ‘in silence, his soul waits for God.’ Moses in Deut. 27:9 also admonished the people to keep silent and hear. Another clear example is seen in 1 Kgs 19, where the Prophet Elijah heard God in a silent atmosphere. Thus, in certain instances, God can only be heard in a silent and peaceful environment.¹⁶

In the context of this study, silence is defined as the intentional and momentary refraining from speaking or taking part in any noise-generated activity so that defined spiritual goals might be achieved. At certain times silence is needed to read, write, and pray among others. Though during the period of silence, there is no external speaking, there are inner discourses with self and with God. This can be termed ‘outward silence.’ Aside from this, silence is kept not only outwardly but also inwardly so that the voice of God might be heard very clearly.

Silent worship is observed in various portions of Scripture. The term *Selah* which means to pause is seen 71 times in 39 Psalms which often directs the reader to pause (Ps 3:4, Ps 24:6). Taylor also adds that Rev. 7:9-10, after the joyful singing and waving of palm branches to glorify God, there was a silent period for over 30 mins when the seventh seal was opened. This may however be impossible in current church services where 30 mins should be allocated to silent worship. Nevertheless, the service schedule can make time for worshippers to have an encounter with God through silence.

According to Clive Staples Lewis, making too much noise on earth may be synonymous with the proverbial noise present in hell. This will in turn drown the melodies of Heaven making it impossible to hear God. However, this position is likely to be debated since much research has been done since he made this assertion.¹⁷ However, there is a correlation between silent worship in both

¹³ [http://www.dictionary.com/define silence](http://www.dictionary.com/define%20silence). Accessed on 25th November, 2022.

¹⁴ [http://www.dictionary.com/define silence](http://www.dictionary.com/define%20silence). Accessed on 25th November, 2022.

¹⁵ Taylor, “Make a Joyful Silence Unto the Lord.”

¹⁶ Taylor, “Make a Joyful Silence Unto the Lord.”

¹⁷ Clive Staples Lewis, *The Collected Works of CS Lewis* (New York: Inspirational Press, 1996).

heavens and on earth. In silence away from the hustle and bustle of this busy world, one communes with the Lord and the soul is satisfied. This is evident in Habakkuk 2:20 “God is in his holy Temple! Quiet everyone—a holy silence. Listen!”

The Case of the Ghanaian Church

Christianity in the Ghanaian space has spanned the eras of the Early Missionaries,¹⁸ and more recently the Neo-Prophetic Churches.¹⁹ However, close observation of Christianity in Ghana reveals a series of complex church developments and categorizations. One can easily categorize churches in the country into their various forms taking into consideration their history, ethos and style of worship or liturgy. Paul Gifford indicates that as of 1980, there were at least four recognizable strands of Ghanaian Christianity.²⁰ He mentions Catholics as the biggest single church. The rest were mainline Protestants, established Pentecostals and the African Independent Churches.²¹ Emmanuel Larbi, studying the geneses, major historical development and theological orientation of the main strands of Ghanaian Christianity, includes early Classical Pentecostal denominations of the 1930s, and the Charismatic Ministries/Churches that started multiplying from the late 1970s as well as the Missionary Churches.²² Current observation will however reveal six strands. These are Mission/Historic churches, Classical Pentecostals, Neo Pentecostals/Charismatic Churches, African Initiated Churches, Neo-Prophetic Movements and Para-Church Movements. The focus of this paper is on the first five strands. This is because members of the Para-church movement may belong to either of the strands.

METHODOLOGY

A research design is an outline used to answer questions and achieve set objectives. The design used for this particular research is descriptive. Descriptive research was used to obtain data pertaining to the current status of a phenomenon (in this case, liturgical silence) and to assess the circumstances of the situation. This research used both quantitative and qualitative methods of research. This included the use of questionnaires to generate data. Field interviews and observation were also used to supplement the collected data. Secondary sources such as editorials, books and articles were also used. The population for the study consisted of Theologians (liturgists), Pastors, selected Christians from the various strands in Ghana, selected residents in greater Kumasi as well as noise experts and enforcement agents. The sample size was one thousand (1,000), comprising twenty-four (24) church leaders, two (2) theologians, as well as two (2) street evangelists, and an audiology specialist. The rest were officials of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Kumasi, the Kumasi Metropolitan Assembly (KMA) environmental health officer, the principal Noise Prosecution officer of the KMA, as well as environmental health officers from the adjoining municipalities.

The above-selected responded to the research questions through interviews. In the sample size of thousand (1,000), nine hundred and nineteen (919) selected members from the selected churches in the Kumasi Metropolis and fifty (50) residents around some of the selected churches responded to the research questions through a questionnaire. Aside the interviews and questionnaires, the liturgical activities of some of the churches²³ were covertly monitored over some time.

Members and leaders of the selected denominations were selected since they are at the centre of the celebration of the liturgy. Christian leaders and theologians were chosen through the purposive sampling method. People who live around some of the selected churches were also included to help

¹⁸Anthony Kodua, *Christianity in Ghana Today* (Accra: Pentecost Press, 2004).

¹⁹Cephas Omenyo, “From the Fringes to the Centre: Pentecostalization of the Mainline Churches in Ghana.” *Exchange* 34, no. 1 (2005): 39–60. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1163/1572543053506338>

²⁰Paul Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004), 20. <https://www.worldcat.org/title/55981029>.

²¹Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy*, 20.

²²Emmanuel Kingsley Larbi, *Pentecostalism: The Eddies of Ghanaian Christianity*, vol. 1 (CPCS, 2001), 529.

²³They are: Divine Word Chapel International, Oforikrom; First Baptist Church, Tech Junction; Bethel Methodist Church, Kwadaso; The Church of Pentecost, Ayeduase; Anglican Church, Kwadaso-Ohwimase, Christ Apostolic Church International, Bantama

the researcher with an independent evaluation of the quietness or otherwise of the liturgies of the selected churches. Most of the selected religious groups were located in residential areas hence they were also chosen. For ethical considerations, all the interviewees were further assured that participation in the study was voluntary and that they had the exclusive right to opt out of the study any time they deemed it fit. For that reason, the researcher did not coerce the interviewees to respond to the interview questions but rather depended on their free will response.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Noisemaking and Spirituality

The spirituality of the Christian faith is measured in the belief system and the formalized way of life that is prescribed to align with the dictates of the Scriptures. A lot of research has gone into this area. Thus, the above question was posed to find out whether making noise or joyful noise is part and parcel of Christian Spirituality. Ninety-one percent (91%) representing twenty-eight (28) of the interviewees indicated that mere noise making in the name of Christianity is not a sign of Christian spirituality but rather a combination of factors including responsible joyful noise determines one's spiritual level. Some of the respondents in this category cited the encounter of "Elijah and the still small voice" (I Kgs 19:12-13) to buttress the point that God does not speak to people in loud voice or in the midst of noise.

It is joyful noise that makes one spiritual not necessarily noise-making. "Linking spirituality to noise making is illogical. Spirituality comprises the way of life, attitude towards the environment and the desire to commune with God. Making noise without giving credence to the environment is not a spiritual activity".²⁴ The Bible calls for joyful noise and not noise-making. Spirituality is about the heart's relation to service to God and to humanity and not just from sounds.²⁵

Samuel Zuul stated that Christian music has got a message to put across and there is a tendency to miss the message in the music when it is played in a noisy manner. The audiology expert added that noise is beneficial only in the laboratory to help in the operation of machines or reactors. "Human beings either in or outside the church do not need excessive noise since they are not machines in the laboratory."²⁶ Still in this category, fifty-six percent (56%) representing four hundred and three (403) of respondents to the questionnaire indicated that noise making is not part of Christian spirituality.

On the other hand, nine percent (9%) representing three (3) of the interviewees indicated that noise is part of Christian life and as a group of people meets to worship there will be a production of some sort of noise but that does not make their worship a nuisance. One of such respondents, Alex Adu Gyamfi remarked: "Take noise making from Christianity and there will be no Christianity at all. However, it can be managed"²⁷

The immediate comment by the researcher on the above responses is that the mere making of noise is not a sign of Christian spirituality. In the same manner, joyful noise that does not take into consideration the environment in which it is made loses its spiritual value. It has been stated earlier that Christians' expression of beliefs in terms of worship should take into account the ecological, cultural, socio-political, historical and contemporary context of the society in which they live. In this sense, the Ghanaian Christian expression of 'joyful noise' in worship should not disturb the environment.

²⁴ Rev Dr Samuel B Zuul, Theologian and a Lecturer in the School of Theology, Christ Apostolic University College, Kumasi, interviewed by author, 26th October, 2021

²⁵ Rev. Dr. Patrick Yankvera, Head Pastor, Rhema Assemblies of God, Ghana, Atonsu Monaco, interviewed by author, 23rd November, 2021.

²⁶ Isaac Nkrumah, Lecturer and Audiologist in the Department of Physics, KNUST, interviewed by author, 27th November, 2021.

²⁷ Alex Adu-Gyamfi, Head Pastor, Living Waters Assemblies of God, Maxima, interviewed by author, 4th August, 2021.

Liturgical Silence and Christian Spirituality

According to the data gathered, respondents were of the view that when Christians clap their hands and sing accompanied by musical instruments, noise is generated; when they scream, sing and worship God in addition to speaking in tongues or using electronic amplification in their liturgical or non-liturgical services, noise is made. However, there is also an element of silence in Christian liturgy. While the designation of what constitutes silence and its emphasis on the liturgies of various denominations varies, its place in the liturgical acts cannot be neglected.

Schuler Michael explains that with the increasing number of believers that fill the churches in communities, there is a development of a new nature that likes to be involved with exciting loud and what he calls 'crazy-for-God worship'. He however added that sometimes worshippers are to be still and rest in the quietness of God's love and passionate presence.²⁸ The researcher agrees with Schuler that a reasonable balance between silence and thrill should be maintained in the worship process. Therefore, after identifying the loud aspect of Christian liturgy, the researcher proceeded to examine the significance of silence in Christian spirituality. All the twenty-eight (28) interviewees²⁹ admitted that silence is necessary for spiritual meditation and a time to listen to the voice of God as some respondents, in bringing out this point cited Habakkuk 2:20 which reads "But the Lord is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him."

However, sixty-seven percent (67%) mostly from the Charismatic and the Pentecostal strands admitted that though they know the significance of silence in Christian spirituality, they do not give prominence to it in their liturgies. One of them³⁰ indicated that anytime he tried to introduce silent prayer during prayer sessions, either some of the members dozed off or complained of a boring church service. In all, of the Neo-prophetic, Classical Pentecostal, and Charismatic Churches visited, it was only the Church of Pentecost that had some sort of silence at the latter part of the worship where the members were directed to sit in silence. Even during this period, the instrumentalist was heard playing some cool background music. However, visits to the mission churches and the AICs revealed a real presence of silence in their respective liturgies.

DISCUSSION

The central focus of this study is the issue of silence in Ghanaian Christian liturgy. All respondents alluded to it as a central and significant part of Christian spiritual development but the issue lies in its practices and emphasis in their respective liturgies. It will therefore not be a deviation for this paper to devote a little space to it.

The result from this study reveals that silence is debatably the most difficult, most counter-cultural, and least practiced spiritual discipline in Ghanaian Christianity, though of varying degrees. The researcher noticed in the analysis of the findings that even a silent prayer or a few minutes of quiet reflection during a worship service could make some people uncomfortable. As a result, silence and solitude are perhaps the most difficult and least practised aspects of Christian liturgy today because the world is now noisy and full of distractions.

However, the significance of silence in Christian spirituality cannot be underestimated. When God revealed himself to Elijah after his desperate despair and running away from Jezebel (1 Kgs 19:12), God told Elijah to wait for his presence as he passed by. God did not show up in familiar ways he had done in the past. God was not in the wind, the earthquake, and the fire. God finally showed Himself to Elijah 'in a still, small voice'.

A lesson from the above experiences for Christians in Kumasi and Ghana at large is that worshipping God should not always have to be in words, sounds, or actions. At certain times worship should be of a God-centred quietness and hush. There are numerous biblical and theological precedents for this (Hab. 2:20, Zep.1:7, and Zec. 2:13). Significantly, it is not the mere stillness that is encouraged,

²⁸ W. M. Schuler, *Breakthrough worship: experiencing the Joy of Heaven*, (Vacaville: Ravish Heart Ministries, 2003), 37.

²⁹ Excluding the EPA, KMA officials and the Audiology expert.

³⁰ Stephen Asiamah, Resident Pastor, Action Chapel International, Bantama, interviewed by author, 10th October, 2021.

but the one which is focused on God. There is time to make a joyful noise to God and there are periods to solely enjoy and honour Him in silence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The research recommends that there should be proper theological and religious education to sensitize Christians on the contextual interpretation of the Bible in general and the texts under study in particular. Contextual in this case implies that biblical passages such as those inviting believers to make joyful noise should be seen in their historical-critical context and placed side by side with the phenomenon of silence. Bible passages should be read and interpreted and applied in the functional equivalence context to provide a more relevant theological bearing. Aside from education, technologies to mitigate or remove noise from Christian worship should be applied in some of the churches that are close to residential areas. The churches should consult qualified architects to design sound-proof building plans for them.

CONCLUSION

Much of the reason that silence has taken center stage in liturgical discussions of late has to do with the prevalence of noisy liturgies in the church today. Silence is also an integral part of the liturgy. It is therefore essential that attention is paid to it. Though it may sound strange, Christians should without shame enrol as apprentices in the school of contemplative prayer.

From the study, the rejection or acceptance of Christ depends largely on how the message of salvation is packaged. Christian worship or liturgy should be attractive and contribute to a healthy environment for living. In as much as Christians need sound to convey the message of the Gospel, the practice of liturgical silence should also be seen as another means of communicating the gospel and also communing with God.

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