

A Ministry of Presence

Chaplaincy, Spiritual Care, and the Law

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While in the past chaplains were mostly religious specialists legally detailed from a particular church to a particular secular setting in order to provide necessary, even mandatory, religious services specific to a particular religious tradition (e.g., private masses and spiritual formation for nobility, last rites for soldiers, or baptism for dying babies) but also in order to provide pastoral counseling for church members who were away from their home religious communities (soldiers, prisoners, patients, and perhaps legislators) as well as to serve as an advocate for social justice, the role has been transformed in the last several decades in the United States and elsewhere. Secularizing processes of various kinds, including the effects of late capitalism and the apparent explanatory power of sciences such as medicine, evolutionary psychology, and neuroscience; greater mobility; a shift in religious authority from traditional leadership to various forms of lay authority; increased religious diversity and intermarriage; and, not least, the press of the politics of religious freedom, have all set the stage for a transformation of the religious services on offer as well as for changes in the professionalization and credentialing of chaplains.

What is common across the various remaining differences among chaplains and their religious affiliations and inclinations in the United States today is the centrality of a religious practice that addresses the suffering of the human person in a very basic, almost naively precultural, way. Prohibited from appearing to favor one's own or to proselytize either formally by law or, more informally, by the political and existential situation of religious diversity and competition, but also because of the illegibility of traditional religious practices to a fragmented and unchurched population, many chaplains in the United States in many different kinds of settings today are

practicing what they call a "ministry of presence."¹ This practice is a minimalist, almost ephemeral, form of empathic spiritual care that is, at the same time, deeply rooted in religious histories and suffused with religious references for those who can read them.² It is religion stripped to the basics. Religion naturalized. Religion without code, cult, or community. Religion without metaphysics. It is religion for a state of uncertainty. As is typical of American religion, it both resists specific theological elaboration and is deeply rooted in a specifically Christian theology of the Incarnation.

A ministry of presence has become commonplace in a breathtakingly short space of time. It has moved well beyond its Christian roots; the phrase, a ministry of presence, is used by chaplains from a wide spectrum of religious traditions in a range of institutional settings to denominate their work. The language of presence is also the language that the government and other institutions often use to describe what chaplains do. Ed Waggoner, a theologian at Yale, writes to describe the various resonances of a ministry of presence in his wife's practice as an Episcopal priest: "it signals a refusal to proselytize; it stresses 'authentic' interpersonal relationships—perhaps less formal—in which the minister is conscious of representing the divine, but also fully present as a human individual with her own life experiences and personality and hopes and fears and joys."³ It is particularly salient, he suggests, in a military setting: "Soldiers are afraid that killing threatens their own humanity. There is an explicit hope (on the part of soldiers and on the part of the Pentagon as an institution) that the chaplain will be a sentinel guarding the human-ness of those who, in the name of their country or of freedom or of whatever, must do violence against fellow humans."⁴ A ministry of presence acknowledges religious pluralism, diffusely represents the divine, and guards the humanness of its participants, chaplain and client, while tacitly acknowledging the violence that "must" be done.

Sometimes an entire ministry is described as a ministry of presence; sometimes presence is one of a number of possible specialized ministries performed by chaplains. One army chaplain summarized his experience being rotated into Bosnia in 1996: "I went to some of the base camps but I did a lot out of Tuzla. It was a base camp ministry, Bible Studies. . . . Wor-

ship services, seeing the people, and a ministry of presence."⁵ The navy, in its recruitment materials, uses the phrase to describe what their chaplains do: "regardless of denomination, the job of a Navy Chaplain is to minister to all. To care for all. To be there for all in those moments of need. Listening. Understanding. Supporting. It's the essence of a ministry of presence."⁶ The army, too: "an army chaplain has to have what we call a ministry of presence."⁷ Chaplains in hospitals, prisons, and universities also describe their work in these words.

It is difficult to tell a single story about the history and practice of the ministry of presence—even of the linguistic origins of the phrase. Ministry of presence has a range of semantic and cultural references. That is part of its elusive power. In some contexts for some people, presence can be reassuringly immanent and down to earth, empty of formal doctrinal content, comfortably abstracted from tradition, but in and for others, it can specifically evoke highly elaborated theological understandings and rituals that acknowledge and pay homage to the presence of the divine in very insistent ways, cutting across Catholic and Protestant spiritual practices. The sayings of Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, a discalced Carmelite monk who lived in Paris in the seventeenth century, collected in *The Practice of the Presence of God*, form a point of reference for some who practice this ministry.⁸ John Wesley, founder of Methodism, among many others, was influenced by Brother Lawrence.

If one listens to current users of the concept, a ministry of presence may seem to refer to the simple physical presence of the minister—the minister's or chaplain's willingness simply to "sit with" a client without anxious expectation. It may refer to the actual presence of an undefined spirit, or, more thickly, by way of reference to specific religious and social doctrines and histories including the notion of Eucharistic presence in the Catholic traditions, the felt presence of Jesus in Protestant pietist traditions, the distinctive understanding of the presence of the divine in Jewish teaching, psychotherapeutic notions of transference, or the usually more broadly humanistic language of such traditions as the hospice movement. A Jewish

5. Kenneth E. Lawson, "Faith and Hope in a War-Torn Land: The US Army Chaplaincy in the Balkans, 1995–2005" (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2006).

6. <http://www.navy.com/careers/chaplain-support/notes-from-the-field/anonymous-chaplain.html> (accessed February 8, 2013).

7. <http://www.goarmy.com/chaplain/profiles/joel-paazer.html> (accessed February 8, 2013); Pauletta Otis, "An Overview of the U.S. Military Chaplaincy," 4; see also Hansen, *Military Chaplains and Religious Diversity*, 19.

8. Thank you to Bernard McGinn for this reference.

1. It was Cynthia Lindner, director of ministry studies at the University of Chicago Divinity School, who first called my attention to the centrality of the ministry of presence to the work of chaplains.

2. See, e.g., Siella Rock, "Editorial," *Religion, State and Society* 39 (2011): 1–8.

3. Personal communication from Ed Waggoner, lecturer in theology, Yale Divinity School (October 27, 2011).

4. *Ibid.*

chaplain, speaking of the response of the chaplain in the context of disaster relief, summarizes this distinctive orientation of pastoral care:

Words do not have to be said—giving a bottle of water to a thirsty person speaks volumes about not being forgotten. Maintaining a calm presence at the bedside does not remove fear; it lessens isolation. To be with a person at a time of need is to honor the survivor's humanity, the inherent dignity endowed by the Creator. Teaching others how to be present, and how to listen to those in distress is a divine-like intervention that spreads the safety net of care and concern.⁹

As continues to be typical in the United States, Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish tropes dominate even when the effort—and even the practice—is broadly intended to be ecumenical or what is called multifaith.

In a recent article in the *Washington Post*, an American army chaplain, Rabbi Arnold E. Resnicoff, responding to the hiring of the first Hindu chaplain and the design of a new insignia for that person, argued that it is time to stop having separate insignia for chaplains from different religious traditions, and rather to institute a single symbol, the shepherd's crook, to denote all military chaplains: "During hard times the insignia has been a silent reminder that a chaplain is present. A 'ministry of presence' begins with an awareness of presence, and we must recapture the power of the chaplain's symbol to broadcast the message that he or she is present, part of the team."¹⁰ Presence implies not just the presence of the individual chaplain, Resnicoff insists, but the presence of the whole host of military chaplains and the unified power symbolized in the shepherd's staff of their no-longer-different religious orientations.

In the contemporary moment, presence also seems to be a practice that is defined and takes place in opposition to a range of possible secular and sectarian modes of human interaction that are seen as undesirable or impossible. It might be read as a form of resistance—or, even, as a movement of insurrection, in Foucault's words.¹¹ The chaplain, whether in a hospital or prison or military setting, is not a doctor or a guard or a soldier or a government agent. He or she is not a priest or a rabbi. He is not trying to improve or constrain your life, but rather simply to be there, to listen, if asked to, to

witness, to be with . . . you, whoever and wherever you are. If the chaplain does not, in the encounter, positively identify himself with a religious tradition, or demand that his client does so, the assumption is that he cannot be accused of imposition or proselytization, either morally or legally. But there is more. She can empower you through her receptive empathetic presence, empower you in handling the sometimes overwhelming demands on the modern self.¹²

Presence also works as a place of resistance to instrumentalist approaches to religion and spirituality. The ministry of presence refuses interpretation and explanation. While in some ways highly immanentist, even secularist in a strong disenchanting sense, presence can refuse to be made part of a system—to be measured and quantified and offered as a means to an end. It is the end. The ministry of presence respects loss. Presence, in other words, means or implies—or attempts to encompass—both presence and absence.

This chapter will look more closely at the ministry of presence and how it is described and defended today by those who practice it, with a view toward understanding it as, in part, a production of a recent religious politics. As is typical of American religion, one sees a mixing not only of religious traditions, but also of modes of religious or spiritual practice that are mystical, pietist, moralist, ritualistic, patriotic, instrumental, or just plain kitsch. As is also typical of American religion, the metaphysical implications are left underdefined, a condition that can be read at the same time as naively ignorant of its imposition or as a genuine reach for liberation.

Defining Presence

The principal reference work for ministers, chaplains, and other practitioners of pastoral care, a religious form of professional personal counseling, is the *Dictionary for Pastoral Care and Counseling*, a fifteen-hundred-page work defining and bringing together in alliance terms from medical, psychological, and theological lexicons of relevance to those who practice this form of ministry across many different denominations and religious communities. "Pastoral care," according to the dictionary, "derives from the biblical image of shepherd and refers to the solicitous concern expressed within the religious community for persons in trouble or distress . . . pastoral care is in

9. Myrna Matsa, "Jewish Theology of Disaster and Recovery," *Journal of Jewish Spiritual Care* 10, no. 1 (2010): 20–31.

10. Arnold E. Resnicoff, "A New Symbol for America's Military Chaplains," *Washington Post*, August 9, 2011. (Thank you to Dianne Avery for this reference.)

11. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 227ff.

12. See Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul: Shaping the Private Self*, 2nd ed. (Free Association Books, 1999).

the cure-of-souls tradition."¹³ The article goes on over some eight double-columned pages to distinguish various branches of the Christian churches in their approach to the cure of souls.

The entry on ministry of presence in the *Dictionary for Pastoral Care and Counseling* explains the deliberate self-abnegation characterizing the practice:

The ministry of presence has come to mean a form of servanthood (*diakonia*, ministry) characterized by suffering, alongside of the hurt and the oppressed—a *being*, rather than a doing or a telling. The articulation or celebration of faith goes on within the individual or community that chooses these circumstances, but does so in the form of *disciplina arcana*, the "hidden discipline," with no program of external testimony.¹⁴

"A *being*, rather than a doing or a telling." The soldier, the patient, the prisoner, the worker is imagined here as in need of companionship not of a shared formal articulation of a specified theory of the purpose or end of the life that is supported. For each person, there is a hidden discipline that does that work. (*Disciplina arcana*, perhaps anachronously here, finds its meaning historically in the practice of early Christians who deliberately withheld knowledge of the "sacred mysteries" from the uninitiated.) The dictionary goes on explicitly to claim its Christian premise:

The ministry of Christian presence is grounded in the doctrine of the Incarnation, sometimes in its kenotic form, and/or the doctrine of Atonement, especially the priestly office. The identification of the ministrant with the condition of those in need is viewed as a continuation of the ministry of Christ who "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant . . . and became obedient unto death" (Phil. 2:7a-8a).¹⁵

The word "presence" does the double work of suggesting nonimposition of a particular religious perspective while also expressing a very Christian understanding of the significance of suffering in the economy of salvation. For those who know the theology of the Incarnation, who have a commit-

13. Rodney I. Hunter, ed., *Dictionary for Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 836-44; See also Myers-Shick, *Helping the Good Shepherd*, delineating the similarities and differences among liberal and conservative Christian approaches to pastoral counseling.

14. *Dictionary for Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 950-51.

15. *Ibid.*

ment to the "real presence" of Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist, and who aspire to live a life in imitation of Christ, being is doing. Overall, the dictionary entry on ministry of presence reflects the often contradictory motives, practices, and religious sourcing that are included in this ministry today, one that does not overtly proclaim its allegiances, but which is deeply inflected by Christian forms of knowing and doing. The entry also notes the importance of the strategic use of this form of ministry in secular lay contexts: "Here Christian presence refers to the exercise of ministry by the people of God in the secular world, preeminently the workplace, horizontally rather than hierarchically."¹⁶

The life and work of Charles de Foucauld is often mentioned, in the *Dictionary for Pastoral Care and Counseling* and elsewhere, as the privileged model for the ministry of presence today. Charles de Foucauld (beatified at the Vatican in 2005) was a French army officer who served in Algeria and Morocco at the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ In the 1890s, he left the French army and entered a Trappist monastery, afterward becoming a hermit and ascetic, first in Palestine and then in southern Algeria among the Tuareg. De Foucauld was killed in 1916 while living as a solitary Christian ascetic. He made no converts or disciples during his lifetime and apparently made no effort to do so. In the thirties, however, groups of dedicated Christians were formed in Algeria known as the Little Brothers of Jesus and the Little Sisters of Jesus, inspired by his ideas and example. Members of these groups live today in small communities among the poor. They make no explicit attempt to convert their neighbors. Their declared purpose is simply to live among them as Christians.¹⁸ There is also a group of regular priests, known as Jesus Caritas, who model their spirituality on the witness of de Foucauld. While we know from his writings that his own practice was explicitly infused with classic French Catholic Eucharistic piety, de Foucauld is venerated today as advocating and modeling respect for Islam, a hero to those who preach interfaith tolerance.¹⁹

Understanding the nature of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the meal and worship service memorializing the Last Supper, has been

16. *Ibid.*

17. De Foucauld's spiritual writings are collected in Robert Ellsberg, ed., *Charles de Foucauld* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999).

18. I am indebted to Fr. Donald Senior of the Catholic Theological Union for directing me to the work of these followers of de Foucauld.

19. For a Muslim reading of de Foucauld's life, see Ali Merad, *Christian Hermit in an Islamic World: A Muslim's View of Charles de Foucauld*, trans. Zoe Hersov (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000). See also *Des Hommes et des Dieux*, a French film directed by Xavier Beauvois about a group of French monks living in the Atlas Mountains in Algeria who were assassinated in 1996.

the object of a great deal of theological work and devotional attention by Christians. Reflecting on what exactly Jesus meant in what are known as the words of institution, "this is my body, this is my blood, do this in memory of me,"²⁰ has occupied the work of many thousands of theologians but also has formed the basis for devotional practices, particularly in the high-liturgical traditions. In the medieval church, images of Christ, meditation on the host, monstrances, liturgical processions—but most importantly the words and actions of the Mass—were designed to awaken in the devotee an experience of the real presence, the continued life of Christ in the world. They were also connected to displays of religio-political power. Such practices, as well as more popular forms of devotion, continue to characterize the sacramentalism of the inheritors of the traditions of the medieval church. In that context, the meaning of presence as a religious practice is shaped in relation to a particular church-defined orthodoxy.

Since the fourth century when a doctrinal definition of the Mass first crystallized, there have been differences about how exactly to understand and express Christian confidence in the continued presence of Christ, and many reformations. Redefinition was occasioned, for example, by the many changes to the churches during the breakup of the Roman monopoly of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Each of the Christian communities has developed articulations of and practices of the Incarnation. Rejecting what they took to be a tendency toward superstitious and nonbiblical idolatry in the church of the Middle Ages, presence in the low-church pietist traditions, for example, articulated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a dominant tradition in the United States, tends to be more associated with the believer's personal experience of the presence of God or Jesus. As the gospel hymn has it:

And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own;
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.²¹

There is a sense in which in the United States these two forms of piety, Catholic Eucharistic devotion and evangelical Protestant pietism, have been largely opaque to one another across this divide until quite recently. In the last few decades, the gap has narrowed and the two traditions have con-

20. As reported in the various gospels: Matthew 26:25–29; Mark 14:21–25; Luke 22:18–21.

21. C. Austin Miles, "In the Garden," RCA Victor Records catalog number LSP-1885.

verged as evangelicals have discovered the medieval liturgy and Catholics have discovered Bible reading. The definitional ambiguity of the expression "ministry of presence" helps to enable that convergence while also opening to a more general spiritual presence embracing religious practices beyond Christianity.

Real Presence

Theology of Incarnation

Presence can be understood then to be the straightforward invocation of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. If Eucharistic presence implies a certain understanding of the continued presence of Jesus in the world after his death in the ritual commemoration of the Last Supper, incarnation also gestures toward the moment of his birth. Incarnation is the process of a god taking on the body of a human—of the enfleshment of a god. For Christians, the Incarnation, as a theological doctrine, refers to the Christian god having become a human with the event of the conception of Jesus, as announced to Mary by the angel.²² In the words of the fourth-century Nicene Creed, "We believe in one God . . . who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man." God made flesh. Christian theology interprets this event as God's taking on of the burden of humanity in order to redeem it. There is for Christians in the Incarnation a simultaneous making available of a future life for humans with the taking on of a body for the god. Incarnation is not an exclusively Christian religious idea, however. Both the enfleshment of gods and the desire to escape the body are present in many traditions.

Incarnation is not just central to many religious traditions and important for any multifaith ministry for that reason; its ubiquity in writing about chaplaincy in particular reflects a persistent concern with the double embeddedness of the chaplain's work—in the church and in the world. Chaplains work in hospitals, on battlefields, on the docks and in factories, and in prisons, among many other places; notwithstanding its claim to be a practice of *spiritual* care, the work of chaplains is profoundly attentive to bodies—to being there. The chaplain understands herself as incarnating God's presence within her flock, particularly in times of suffering and death.

John Brinsfield, in his history of the US Army chaplaincy since Vietnam, emphasizes the intense identification of military chaplains with the gritty lives of soldiers. In a chapter describing the role of chaplains in Operation Desert Shield, "Ministry of Presence: Go Where Soldiers Go," Brinsfield

22. Luke 1:28–30.

assembles a pastiche of reminiscences about the chaplains' experiences, extolling the integration of chaplains with the lives of the soldiers. As he explains, "For many chaplains, ministry during Desert Shield did not begin at the time of arrival in Saudi Arabia, but from the moment the troop unit was alerted During the flights chaplains walked the aisles of the aircraft and talked and joked with their people. Upon arrival, of course, the chaplains went wherever the soldiers did." He quotes Jeffrey Phillips, author of a memoir about the first Gulf War, who was there: "When the 1st Cavalry Division arrived at Dhahran, they emerged into suffocating heat, . . . they were flooded with sensations: the first sight of an Arab in red and white checked headress; from nowhere, a band playing . . . the first drop of sweat trickling down the small of their backs." Quoting from one of his many interviews with former army chaplains who were there at Dharam: "We couldn't wait to get out of there," Chaplain Sanford recalled, "but we were busy every minute listening to the soldiers' gripes, concerns and complaints."²³ Robert J. Phillips, a retired navy chaplain agrees: "The unit chaplain is not imbedded with that unit. He or she is *incarnate* with that unit."²⁴

The chaplain lives the physical life of the soldier. He is present in that sense, but he also incarnates, one might say, the legal and ethical ambiguities of his many roles. He physically suffers the life of the soldier, but he also suffers the impossible contradictions of his own suspension at the center of so many demands. Phillips optimistically invokes this notion of presence in his description of the chaplain's work:

As a point person for the free exercise of religion for all personnel, as a [*sic*] *incarnate presence* in nurturing the human worth and needs of service members, as a "helpful bystander" in settings of potential moral disengagement, and as a caring bridge-builder for the combat veteran's spiritual and emotional reentry into the larger world, the military chaplain can offer the armed forces a unique and indispensable service without betraying the integrity of the faith group *ethos* that has endorsed him or her to serve.²⁵

Speaking with a former navy chaplain who served for more than two decades, I asked her whether what I was calling in-betweenness properly characterized the chaplain's role. She responded quickly and emphatically that the chaplain could not be effective if she was in-between. She must fully enter

into the life of the marine—into the muddiness and danger and ennui. She would only be trusted if she was one of them.²⁶ Presence is a deeply physical experience, but it is also, as chaplains keep saying, a "suffering with."

It is not just the American army. Joanne Benham Rennick explains how Canadian military chaplains, facing "a threefold challenge in carrying out traditional religious ministry: increasing pluralism, deinstitutionalized beliefs and the loss of moral consensus," have also developed a "ministry of presence." Rennick explains that a ministry of presence involves participating in and being vulnerable to the world of the soldier, and—when necessary—suffering alongside them. She notes that "the [Canadian] Department of National Defence defines the Ministry of Presence as, 'being available to, and known by, the soldier, being available for a comforting chat, developing a relationship with the members of the unit, and participation in unit life. . . . [This ministry] makes the chaplaincy an outward and visible sign of the church who cares and consoles.'²⁷ Canadian prison chaplains also speak of incarnation: "[Presence] can be determined by checking the sign-in sheet at the front gate . . . visible presence is something less concrete . . . refers to the theological concept of incarnating the divine in the ministry and pastoral services offered."²⁸ These are the words of a sacramental ministry.

Hospital chaplains also speak this way, as Wendy Cadge explains: "What chaplains most offer in hospitals is their presence. 'Just somebody who walks in, takes them [the patient or family] as they are, listens to their stories, shares their concerns . . . somebody who takes them the way they are, who has no expectations.' . . . There's a challenge to put words to what we do . . . it is about presence, about being present for whatever happens."²⁹ This incarnational aspect of chaplaincy work—of the ministry of presence—also finds a historical resonance with the priests who joined the labor movement. For example, in an article remembering the work of George Higgins, a Catholic priest labor activist, William Bole comments, "He often referred to his work in the labor movement as simply a 'ministry of presence.' When he was asked in a 1994 interview to list two or three of his greatest

26. Personal conversation with Joan Miller (February 8, 2013). Quoted with permission. Joan Miller served for over twenty years as a navy chaplain in both active and reserve components. She also emphasized in our conversation that a chaplain must be "wholly absorbed in the life of one's faith tradition as well."

27. Department of National Defence, Canada, "Chaplains: What They Do," Joanne Benham Rennick, "The Ministry of Presence and Operational Stress," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 7 (Spring 2005).

28. "National Chaplaincy Evaluation: Pastoral Care" Evaluation and Review Branch. Chaplaincy Branch, NHQ File # 394-2-026.

29. Cadge, *Paging God*, 93.

23. Brinsfield, *Encouraging Faith*, pt. 2, 92–93.

24. Phillips, "The Military Chaplaincy of the 21st Century," 5.

25. *Ibid.*, 9.

accomplishments with labor, he said, 'I tend not to think in those terms. I've always felt that my role, a limited role, was . . . just to be there, to be present, to give them support.'³⁰ Lacking specific doctrinal content, presence gains the specificity of its content from the shared life experience, as a way of overcoming the alienation—and the absence—of modern ways of living. A well-known Jewish chaplain explaining the work of the chaplain says that "the third resource is the concept of 'non-anxious presence,' which is how many chaplains might speak about the 'ministry of presence.'³¹

Another frequently mentioned exemplar for the ministry of presence is Henri Nouwen, a Dutch Catholic priest and widely read and revered spiritual teacher. He lived at the L'Arche community for the intellectually disabled in Toronto for the last ten years of his life until his death in 1996. He spoke of his incarnational ministry to the mentally disabled as a ministry of presence: "More and more, the desire grows in me simply to walk around, greet people, enter their homes, sit on their doorsteps, play ball, throw water, and be known as someone who wants to live with them. It is a privilege to have the time to practice this simple ministry of presence."³² A ministry of presence means living the life of the person who is being cared for, suffering with them and very specifically undergoing the same living and working conditions, to "be known as someone who wants to live with them."

Like those who teach clinical pastoral education, Nouwen's writing emphasized the value of this ministry for the minister as well as for those who are ministered to. The need in the ministry of presence is not simply that of the soldier, the prisoner, or the patient. Each of the testimonies in this book also reveals a yearning on the part of the chaplain. Wendy Cadge comments on the desire of chaplains to be able to record their visits on hospital charts. What she describes is almost like the motive for tagging graffiti: I was here.³³ In a simple sense, it is about not being alone. The chaplain offers herself as a sacrifice to the suffering brought on by a myriad of seemingly intractable modern ills and the prevalence of a sense of abandonment, including her own. But she also seeks to be in relationship, not just with the divine, but

30. William Bole, "The Ministry of Presence," *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 19, no. 4 (2001): 3–10; "Social Catholicism: Essays in Honor of Monsignor George Higgins," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 19, no. 4 (2001): 3–10. See also Jerry Fileau, "Monsignor George Higgins: Labor Priest; A Success Story Par Excellence," National Institute for the Revival of the Priesthood, <http://www.jknirp.com/higgins2.htm> (accessed February 8, 2013).

31. Edwin H. Friedman, *From Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford Press, 2011), 208–10.

32. Henri Nouwen, *Gracías: A Latin American Journal* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 147.

33. Cadge, *Paging God*, 180.

also with the client. As Constance Furey says, "What makes religious relationships—relationships construed in relation to divine as well as human beings—especially intriguing is the particular nuance and intensity of the way they combine the extraordinary and the ordinary, the normative and the transcendent."³⁴ Likewise, Robert Orsi affirms the ongoing importance of practices of presence, even in the face of centuries of insistence on the absence of God.³⁵ Christopher Swift gives the example of a chaplain entering a hospital room in which all the patient wished to talk about was the failure of the hospital staff; all she wanted was for him to listen to her and take her concerns seriously.³⁶ Summarizing his work for hospice, one chaplain interviewed by the *New York Times* simply said, "We are there to be there."³⁷

The Science of Presence

How is it that a ministry of presence can be the appropriate prescription in a world characterized by all the measuring and quantifying of spiritual assessment today? How can something as naively intuitive and apparently nonrational as presence be the answer to poor spiritual health in a scientific age? The ministry of presence seems to depend on a deliberate rejection of utilitarian action, a rejection that at its strongest might even be seen as a witness to the apocalyptic. Yet, in our evidence-based, data-driven era, there is a constant pressure on chaplains to justify their work in biomedical and quantitative terms. Even as simple and apparently nonutilitarian a practice as presence demands proof of efficacy and causal explanation. A Houston-based health-care chaplaincy explicitly includes science in its review of all of the various religious approaches comprehended in their ministry, citing "a recent study [in which] scientists found that hospital patients who had someone sit with them a few hours a week, as opposed to those who did not, had changes in brain chemistry which indicate that they are less likely

34. Constance Furey, "Body, Society, and Subjectivity in Religious Studies," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80 (2012): 7–33.

35. Robert Orsi, "Real Presences: Catholic Prayer as Intersubjectivity: From Practices of Presence to Sacred Absence: Theoretical Context," posted in *Reverberations: New Directions in the Study of Prayer*, March 18, 2013, <http://forums.ssrc.org/ndsp/2013/03/18/from-practices-of-presence-to-sacred-absence/>.

36. Swift, *Hospital Chaplaincy*, 109–10. The importance of simply listening is constantly mentioned by chaplains. J. L. Cedarleaf traces the emphasis on listening in pastoral care to Richard Cabot and Russell Dicks's early influential work, *The Art of Ministering to the Sick* (New York: Macmillan, 1936). S. V. "Listening" in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*.

37. Paul Vitello, "Hospice Chaplains Take Up Bedside Counseling," *New York Times*, October 29, 2008.

to become depressed." Research journals are replete with studies that seek to explain and show the value of presence in healing.

The partnership between Christian ministry and psychology is an old one, as has been noted. The value of presence is testified to in that literature as well. Claire Badarocco writes of America's long-standing faith in "healing presence" and the power of positive thinking on health.³⁸ Christopher White, in his history of spirituality and science, tells of Edwin Starbuck, a nineteenth-century Canadian psychologist, and his idea of the value of "infusing Presence."³⁹ One finds a continuity both with explicitly religious traditions of healing and an effort in the scientific community to account for the apparent value of companionship, natural and supernatural, to recovery. Chaplains offer themselves as expert in presence—as practitioners, perhaps, of an eclectic applied psychotheology.⁴⁰

Seeking to find an empirical basis for the ministry of presence, one British hospice chaplain undertook empirical research in a hospital in the United Kingdom.⁴¹ Bringing together contemporary Christian teaching, psychotherapy, Heidegger, Levinas, and a variety of social scientific research methods, he concluded, after interviewing a group of British chaplains who work with dying patients, that

working with their patients' transference projections—positive or negative—to the point of being accepted as an accompanier; demonstrating their preparedness to stay-with their patient no-matter-what; attending to their patient's soul by sharing something of their experience, containing and surviving it: in these ways chaplains may comfort (*confortare*) their patients and may consequently support them to be hopeful, not now so much concerned with the future of desire unfulfilled, but to be a being towards life, open to connectedness and possibility—their hope reconfigured to "hope in the present."⁴²

Sociologist Erving Goffman described what he called copresence as the experience of face-to-face interaction.⁴³ In one essay on what he called face-

work, Goffman analyzed the dyad of the modern encounter between two persons:

Many Gods have been done away with, but the individual himself stubbornly remains a deity of considerable importance. He walks with dignity and is the recipient of many little offerings. He is jealous of the worship due him, yet, approached in the right spirit, he is ready to forgive those who may have offended him. Because of their status relative to his, some persons will find him contaminating while others will find they contaminate him, in either case finding that they must treat him with ritual care. Perhaps the individual is so viable a god because he can actually understand the ceremonial significance of the way he is treated, and quite on his own can respond dramatically to what is proffered him. In contacts between such deities there is no need for middlemen; each of these gods is able to serve as his own priest.⁴⁴

Chaplains offer themselves as everyman's dyadic companion, with the possibility of a triad left ambiguous.

Politics of Presence

It is very hard to escape the idea that the ministry of presence is a profoundly Christian practice in most American contexts, whatever the intention, even in its anonymous generalized form, and yet it also gains credibility in part from its ability to enable cross-religious communication. Like other efforts at coping with the social fact of religious multiplicity, it seems always to be both/and, both Christian and secular or neutral.

In a familiar interfaith comparative move, the Houston-based health-care chaplaincy mentioned above explains on their website how the ministry of presence is common to all world religions, naming them one by one, and in the process slowly erasing their differences, merging them all into a universal ministry of presence.⁴⁵ From Judaism is taken creation and scripture: "In Jewish theology, presence begins with God's hands-on creation of humanity and understanding that it is not good for a human to be alone in the world. . . . The idea of humans companionship each other through life's suffering is poignantly depicted in the Book of Job. . . . Job is not alone; the community is supporting him through the presence of his three companions." From Christianity, the Incarnation: "The idea of presence is grounded

38. Claire Badarocco, *Prescribing Faith: Medicine, Media, and Religion in American Culture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 114. See also Candy Brown, *Healing Gods*.

39. White, *Unused Minds*, 156–57.

40. See Eric Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflection on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

41. Steve Nolan, "Hope Beyond (Redundant) Hope: How Chaplains Work with Dying Patients," *Palliative Medicine* 25 (2011): 21.

42. *Ibid.*, 25.

43. Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face-to-Face Behavior* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1967).

44. *Ibid.*, 95.

45. www.interfaithcarepartners.org (accessed July 22, 2013).

in the theology of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Christians are charged to show and be the love of God (in our imperfect way) to others, just as Jesus Christ was love incarnate.⁴⁶ Presence is understood to be the will of Allah, as exemplified by the Prophet: "For Muslims, being present to the sick and elderly is considered a command of Allah as exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad, who taught that the community should visit the sick." And "the worldview in Eastern traditions includes suffering as a given of life's existence." The fusing of these religious narratives and ideas, an effort that draws confirmation from a certain irenic comparative approach to the study of religion, authenticates and authorizes the work of the chaplain.⁴⁶

The Houston chaplaincy, too, returns, however, to the example of the French mystics. "They are experts at 'being present,'" the Houston folks insist, citing the words of another Frenchman, the seventeenth-century theologian François Fénelon:

Speak little; listen much; think far more of understanding hearts and of adapting yourself to their needs than of saying clever things to them. Show that you have an open mind, and let everyone see by experience that there is safety and consolation in opening his mind to you. Avoid extreme severity, and reprove, where necessary, with caution and gentleness. Never say more than is needed, but let whatever you say be said with entire frankness. Let no one fear to be deceived by trusting you.⁴⁷

Fénelon was a Roman Catholic theologian, churchman, and tutor to the son of Louis XIV of France, a man who occupied a complicated place between religious tolerance and religious proselytization, between the monarchy and the aristocracy, and between advocacy on behalf of religious innovators within the Catholic Church and obedience to authority. A prolific writer, bits and pieces of his writings circulate as Christian wisdom today.⁴⁸ The phenomenology of presence resonates with strains within contemporary French philosophical theology as well, including Jean-Luc Marion's notion of the saturated phenomenon,⁴⁹ while that tradition also feels alien to the practiced resistance of American religion to such metaphysical articulation.

46. The drawing of a common practice from comparison across traditions can be seen in the writings of Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, and Huston Smith.

47. <http://www.healthcarechaplaincy.org/about-us/finding-meaning-bringing-comfort.html> (accessed July 21, 2013).

48. As a quick Google search will reveal! He was also read in the nineteenth century as any reader of nineteenth-century English novels will know.

49. See, e.g., Kevin Hart, ed., *Jean-Luc Marion: The Essential Writings* (New York: Fordham

Can a ministry of presence ever actually overcome structures of difference—and injustice? Labor priests and others have used the ministry as a form of leftist political action. A powerful example of such ministry is provided in the extraordinary Canadian novel *Such Is My Beloved* by Morley Callaghan.⁵⁰ Challenged by his bishop to explain why he has taken to hanging out at night in the flat of a couple of young prostitutes in 1930s Depression-era Toronto, Father Dowling explains that his is a ministry of presence. The lack of an explicit articulation of what presence is and how it works can allow the minister to focus on the object of the ministry without focusing on the source of suffering. It can be a way of avoiding both the theology and the politics of the ministry of presence—of both the problem of theodicy, as Hauerwas notes, and the possibility of political critique of the secular authority responsible for the suffering.

There remains an unresolved tension between a presence that leads to trust and an ongoing need to account to yourself, your religious masters, and the institution that employs you—as to the value of what you do—a tension that makes politics difficult. Theologian John Cobb worries about this aspect of the ministry of presence: "The pastor's task is to be present with and to hear the sufferer, to let the parishioner know that expressing fear, anger, and loneliness is acceptable . . . but to treat it only that way fails to take the questioner with full seriousness as a human being. A pastor who has not reflected about the question, who has nothing to say, has a truncated ministry."⁵¹ In the military context, for example, it could be seen as a way of avoiding conflict over the morality of war.

Army Chaplain Timothy Bedsole tells of a sermon he gave to explain this aspect of the ministry of presence:

Several years ago I was invited by a group of students to speak at an anti-war "preach-in." . . . I titled my sermon "Buying the Field," using a text from the book of Jeremiah. . . . Jeremiah is told by God to purchase land during a time when Israel was under siege and he was confined in the king's courtyard in Jerusalem. . . . He bought the field with silver and recorded the deed even though he would never be able to see the land or utilize it. . . . military chaplains serve in an organization where they do not vote on war but rather serve

University Press, 2013).

50. Morley Callaghan, *Such Is My Beloved* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934).

51. J. B. Cobb Jr., "The Problem of Evil and the Task of Ministry," in *Examining Evil: Line Options in Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Stephen T. Davis (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 181.

the warriors by providing a "ministry of presence" in the organization—that is, chaplains "buy into the field" of ministry in the military.⁵²

They buy it on faith, like Jeremiah. Bedsole's idea is that the purpose of being a military chaplain is untranslatable. You do it because you are compelled to be there for the soldiers. But Bedsole does not leave it there. He also says that you do it in support of an American idea of freedom: "Those serving in the U.S. military are dedicated to the protection of the freedom that allowed them to gather and protest against the war. . . . Just as Jeremiah felt compelled by God to buy the field no matter his opinion of the circumstances, military chaplains feel compelled by God and country to serve members of the military."⁵³ Like Jeremiah, they serve a political reality as well as a divine one. A similar point about the usefulness of the ministry of presence to the military is made in an article about American operations in Kosovo: "Individual chaplains having the same faith as indigenous religious groups were solicited to build goodwill among the local populace through the ministry of presence. . . . In Kosovo an Orthodox US Army chaplain interacted with local Orthodox clergy to promote understanding and confidence toward US military operations."⁵⁴ Many critics of the provision of spiritual care through government chaplaincies think that the problem is too much overt proselytizing, that is, they worry about the coerciveness and Christian-ness of a "metaphysics of presence," but the bigger problem may be rather a naive service of whatever project is at hand.

Christopher Swift persuasively insists that, for all of this, a ministry of presence is the necessary work of a highly skilled professional:

In a culture where the production of new knowledge and skill is paramount, the chaplains are vulnerable to a creeping sense of occupational inferiority. However, I would contend that being alive to the ambiguities and "emptiness" of spirituality in the face of suffering is in itself a vocational skill that has value. . . . Standing in the place where there are no answers, no quick exits to open, does not require the gifts of those whose hands are full. It is a situation that calls for great patience, compassion and faithfulness to the value of the human being in front of you. While some might assume that this kind of

52. Bedsole, "The World Religions Chaplain."

53. Ibid.

54. William Sean Lee, Christopher J. Burke, and Zonna M. Crayne, *Military Chaplains as Peace Builders: Embracing Indigenous Religions in Stability Operations* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 2005).

availability is simple, I would contend that it is fact the product of considerable preparation, maturity and deep personal self-knowledge.⁵⁵

For Swift, the work is important in itself.

A ministry of presence, whatever else it may do, does seem to solve the US constitutional problem. Avoiding naming the particularist narratives that might be invoked in support of the work of chaplains allows the employers and the chaplains—and the judges—to make the claim that this is a necessary ministry that has a neutral scientific basis and that serves all without discriminatory imposition. Politically and theologically speaking, it affirms the real presence—incarnation—without hierarchy.

Minimalism

Haunting the ministry of presence is the absence to which the ministry of presence is apparently responding, an absence that, for many, is at the heart of religious mystical reflection and practice. The minimalist movement in art is understood by some to spiritualize something that is termed "empty presence." In an article about this work, art historian Anna Chave considers the spirituality depicted by minimalist artists, including an art installation in New Mexico by minimalist artist Walter de Maria entitled *Lightning Field*, an installation of poles evenly distributed across a stretch of desert:

Just as the *Field's* spiked, steel poles impose the ubiquitous, tyrannical regularity of the grid on the randomness of nature, nature simultaneously imposes its own insistent randomness over the regularity of the grid: De Maria's perfectionist demand that "the plane of the tips" should "evenly support an imaginary sheet of glass" necessitated strictly differentiating all those apparently identical poles, making each a singular height, ranging all the way from 15 feet to 26 feet 9 inches, to accommodate—while, as it were, canceling—the randomness of terrain chosen in part for its seeming flatness.⁵⁶

At its best, a ministry of presence might seem to be understood to be a similar expression of the irresolvability of nature and culture.

55. Swift, *Hospital Chaplaincy*, 175.

56. Anna Chave, "Revaluing Minimalism: Patronage, Aura, and Place," *Art Bulletin* 90 (2008): 466–86.