SACRED PLACES IN MODERN WESTERN CULTURE

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PEETERS
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THE SILENT MARCH:
A RITUAL OF HEALING AND PROTEST FOR AN AFFLICTED SOCIETY

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Since the 1990s the collective public manifestation termed a silent march (stille tocht) in the Netherlands has become a general and widely accepted ritual in crisis situations after disasters, untimely deaths or cases of 'senseless violence'. This march has acquired a place as a prototype in local and national observance, memorialization, protest, and reconciliation. The ritual is usually spatially situated at or near the spot where a disaster or incident took place. The group participating in the silent march follows a route that might pass meaningful places in order to reach the site where the incident happened, with the intent to create there a temporary memorial of documents and objects. In doing so the afflicted locus delicti is transformed into a more serene locus sacer.

Within the repertoire of public and collective manifestations and rituals the silent march was established relatively recently in its particular form and performativity. The silent march is first and foremost a collective expression of grief and mourning for what has happened to a person or group. The grief is shared with the relatives of the victim or victims, but also with all those others who feel themselves affected in one way or another (friends, neighbors, fellow residents of a city, fellow sufferers, representatives of politics and churches, etcetera). As a rule these mourning processions are also an expression of widely shared feelings of moral indignation, addressed to the government or society as a whole. The silent march, then, delivers a more or less implicit protest against phenomena such as senseless violence or dangerous conditions (particularly involving traffic and transportation) and the traumas they cause. Silent marches are grass-roots initiatives of collective action. They are organized by family, acquaintances, or neighbors, but often also receive assistance from the local government and/or local victim services or anti-racism groups, etcetera.

The popularity of the silent march can be explained by the fact that in modern society people are increasingly less likely to accept premature,
illogical, or irrational ('senseless') death. The idea has taken root that in our contemporary, technological, closely regulated world, with the marvels of modern science and medicine, death can to a considerable extent be banished. When people are then confronted by a premature death without rhyme or reason, the grief is all the greater, the grief processing all the more difficult, and the world at large must be informed of this 'injustice', memorialized in public at the 'afflicted' place. The silent march has proven an effective instrument for this.

These silent marches should be seen as an originally 'Dutch' ritual, evolving out of older religious and commemorative processionial practices in the Netherlands. The suppressed Dutch Catholics 'invented' the silent march as a response to the ban placed by the Calvinist government on public Catholic rituals. Their circumambulations followed the pre-Reformation procession routes in a non-liturgical, non-ostentatious and silent manner, a way that could not be forbidden by the Protestant authorities. In spite of the minimalistic form in which the silent procession was performed it was nevertheless perceived as an implicit protest against the Protestant government. This political quality was one of the reasons which helped to make the ritual successful. A second root can be traced to the end of the Second World War and the search for an appropriate national reconciliation ritual after the humiliation of the Dutch nation and the suffering inflicted upon its people. With the experience of the power of the religious silent march, silence was again chosen as the defining element for the hundreds of annual mourning and memorial marches commemorating the war deaths.

Both related origins directly inspired the present-day marches. From the 1960s onward, silent marches became popular in the Netherlands as an instrument of protest against ongoing or new wars, against oppressive regimes, and after the deaths of exceptional international figures. From the 1990s they became the pre-eminent mourning and crisis ritual after traumatic death, more or less 'reserved' for cases of civilian victims. A first massive (40,000 participants) march was the memorial march held after an El Al Boeing jet freighter crashed into a large apartment complex in the Amsterdam Bijlmermeer in 1992. The confirmation of

Auschwitz commemoration in Amsterdam: silent march from the town hall to the Auschwitz monument in the Wertheimpark, 25 January 2009 (photo: P.J. Margry)
the last development came with the death of Meindert Tjoelker in 1997, a single victim of 'senseless violence', a societal issue that became more and more a trauma in the 'secure' welfare state the Netherlands was supposed to be. During a bachelor party outing, the week before his marriage, the 30-year-old Meindert was kicked to death by four men who were vandalizing bicycles, after he had ordered them to stop. Partly because his victimization assumed almost mythic proportions, this event definitively established the ritual format of the silent march as reserved purely for cases of senseless violence and disaster situations. Since then the ritual has been part of the national mourning repertoire. If the trauma of the fatal loss, and – perhaps a still more decisive factor – if the trauma of the way in which this loss occurred was great enough, a silent march would be organized. It is now almost unthinkable that a silent march would be called to reinforce the salary demands of the police during pay negotiations, as still happened in November 1995.

A silent march held by friends of animals for a dog which had died as a result of neglect and abuse by its owner created general indignation, because it was seen as a trivialization of a ritual that should be reserved for human victims in particularly tragic circumstances.

The ritual is not static. In recent years it happens more often that flyers, objects or attributes, balloons, and torches are carried in the procession, and the strict regimen of silence is increasingly broken. Participants regularly carry texts which agitate against what happened or against the situation which allowed it to occur. With increasing frequency groups also let themselves be persuaded at particular moments, often at the end of the march, to chant slogans or to sing together, in order to press home their cause; the tension generated by the emotional silence appears to require some form of discharge. Usually the march ends with a speech by the mayor or another respected person.

The attention given by the media to the phenomenon has played an important role in the establishment of the silent marches. Despite the fact that as a rule they are responses to local events by locally organized groups, these marches represent feelings also found elsewhere, nationally and throughout society. It is in their mediatized performance that they also gain national significance. The incidents leading to the marches are presented as typical examples of the decline in the nation's morale, a lack of supervision by the government, or the injustice of life. Here, too, the ritual permits the community involved to express itself, and further serves to exorcize the 'evil' and to make via the media a public,
national appeal for the maintenance of norms and values in contemporary society – one in which norms and values are believed to have become eroded, and increasingly less identifiable.

As the silent marches connect questions around life and death and the norms and values of society with questions of moral and religious significance, it appears that at moments of collective trauma and emotional crisis the ritual has the power to unite people, and to generate a meaningful answer to the events and feelings of unease that cause existential turmoil to society as a whole and individual citizens. Thus, they are a form of civil religion that embodies a consensus with regard to the desire and need for social cohesion, healing, and integration that can in a certain transcendent way manifest itself in Robert Bellah's words as 'an overarching sense of unity'. The silent march can therefore be characterized as a crisis ritual of memorialization and cohesion, and an expression of civil religion.
The effectiveness of the marches is to certain extent measurable. They can realize (and have realized) political-administrative policy changes, contribute to the solution of problems such as violence and insecurity, and locally fulfil a coping function by which personal grief can be healed and processed, while at the same time allowing feelings of anger and powerlessness to be ventilated. However, the question arised how a slight decrease in silent marches could be explained. Perhaps people feel that to some extent the point has been made, and some goals have actually been realized: receiving attention from politicians and administrations. More probably, on the one hand there has been an acquiescence among the public that ‘senseless violence’ can never be expelled completely, and on the other society might have become saturated by the mediatization of the many marches, and organizing one has become too much of a moral obligation, lacking real spontaneity. Notwithstanding this process, still, in situations of societal despair, the marches remain an important ritual.

The practice of silent marches has not been restricted to the Netherlands. Besides incidental marches in the past (for example for Martin Luther King and Harvey Milk in America), silent marches for comparable crisis situations have been introduced during the last ten years in countries such as Belgium, England, Switzerland and the US.

References and Further Reading

MARGRY, P.J.: ‘Stille omgang als civil religion: een manifestatie van Nederlandse identiteit’, in Ch. CASPERS & P.J. MARGRY: Identiteit en spiritualiteit van de Amsterdamse Stille Omgang (Hilversum 2006) 41-84