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The Awe-Inspiring Reality of Christ's Silence

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The high priest stood up in the sanhedrin and asked Jesus: 'Have you no answer to make?' But Jesus 'was silent and made no answer' (Mk 14:61; Mt 26:63). While Jesus was in Herod's court, he maintained the same silence. The scribes accused Jesus vehemently. Herod questioned Him at length. His courtiers ridiculed and mocked him. But Jesus 'made no answer' (Lk 23:9). Pilate too was exasperated by Jesus' reticence. 'You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you and power to crucify you?' But apart from an occasional word, 'Jesus gave no answer' (Jn 19:9). Neither did He give an answer to the Pharisees who derided Him during the crucifixion. His only reply was the prayer 'Father, forgive them' (Lk 23:34). Jesus' silence is a datum of ancient tradition firmly embedded in the passion accounts.

The early Christians recognized in this one more feature of that suffering servant whom they knew to be Jesus.¹ 'As a sheep led to the slaughter or a lamb before its shearer is dumb, so he opens not his mouth' (Is 53:7-8; Acts 8:32-35). But the silence of Christ is not a later reconstruction to fit the prophecy. The inner cohesion of Christ's silence with other events in the passion story demonstrates this. It is also abundantly clear from the way Peter refers to the fact. In the context of instructing Christians to suffer patiently, he naturally turns to the example of Christ. After quoting the words of scripture 'No guile was found on his lips' (Is 53:9), he goes on in his *own* words: 'When He (Jesus) was reviled, He did not revile in return; when He suffered He did not threaten; but He trusted Him who judges justly' (1 Pet 2:23). Christ's actual behaviour is the model for Christians: 'Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps' (1 Pet 2:21). This prophecy is explained by Christ's factual behaviour and not vice versa.²

The Fathers of the first centuries take issue with Jesus' silence in different ways. Their main concern appears to have been the fear that it might be mistakenly understood as an admission of guilt. In

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¹ As C. H. Dodd has shown, OT passages bearing on the Servant of the Lord (Is 42:1-44,5; 49:1-13; 50:4-11; 52:13-53,11; 61. Ps 22; 31; 38; 69; etc.) were employed by Christian teachers as 'documenta' to illustrate the redemptive role of Christ (*According to the Scriptures*, Nisbet, London, 1952; Fontana edition 1965, pp. 88-103).

² Compare: D. H. Milling, 'History and Prophecy in the Marcan Passion Narrative', *IJT* 16, (1967), pp. 42-53.

Ignatius sees the same silence at work in the life of Christ:

'It is better to keep silent and to be, than to talk and not to be. It is a fine thing to teach, if the speaker practise. Now there is one Teacher who spoke and it came to pass: yes, even the things He has done in silence are worthy of the Father. He that truly possesses the word of Jesus is able also to hearken unto his silence, that he may be perfect: that through his speech he may act and through his silence he may be known'. (Eph 15).

Lightfoot maintains that the immediate cause for Ignatius to utter these words was the circumstance that the bishop of Ephesus, Onesimus, was a quiet person, rather reticent and withdrawn⁹. Ignatius who had been much impressed by the bishop (Eph 5) may have seen in him a living example of the 'silent Christ'.

'In proportion as a man sees that his bishop is silent, let him fear him the more. . . We ought to regard the bishop as the Lord Himself'. (Eph 6).

Whatever the occasion, the fact remains that Ignatius was struck by 'the silence of Christ'. He recognised it as an important way in which Christ communicated with His followers. 'Even the things Christ did in silence are worthy of the Father'. Did Ignatius think of Jesus' hidden life? Or did he refer more particularly to His suffering? 'He that truly possesses the word of Jesus is able also to hearken unto his silence'. What is this 'silence of Jesus' that the believer should listen to? Is it the silence of Christ as expressed in the gospel narratives? Or does it comprehend other present-day forms of silence in which Christ manifests himself? If the silent bishop of Ephesus made the silence of Christ a contemporary reality for Ignatius, in what other ways can the silence of Christ be heard and should it be listened to?

The silence of God

When Almighty God did not listen to the prayer of an innocent man and allowed the wicked to pursue their evil course, God was occasionally said to be 'silent' (Heb 1:13; Ps 28:1; 50: 21; 35:22; Is 57: 11; 65:6). In such cases the delay of saving intervention on God's part was considered an unusual and exceptional occurrence. It happened. But the conviction was that it happened rarely and it should not happen. The silence of God was considered to be essentially of limited duration.

The real theologian of God's silence in the Old Testament is Koholet. Even though he never uses the word, the idea is an integral part of Koholet's thought. Koholet was a realist. Where other religious leaders mouthed platitudes, Koholet stated the blunt truth. Koholet was haunted by the riddle of human existence, by its soberness and harshness, by the utter uselessness of human effort, by the obvious contradiction between religious promise and everyday reality. As far as human observation goes, the saintly person suffers and dies just as the sinner. 'The wise man dies just like the fool' (Ecc. 2:17).

⁹ J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Part II, Macmillan, London 1889, pp. 15-17 (introd.); pp. 68-70 (commentary).

'Everything before men is useless, since one fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice'. (Ecc 9:1b-2)

The unprejudiced observer will note that man dies just like an animal.

'For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same: as one dies so dies the other'. (Ecc 3:19)

Worst of all, during persecution, war, rape and murder it is brute power that wins the upper hand. An objective observation of human events forces on one the conclusion that for some people life is simply unbearably cruel.

'Again I saw all the oppressions that are practised under the sun.

And behold, the tears of the oppressed and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them (the oppressed). And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun'. (Ecc 4:1-3)

Kohelet knows God to be responsible for this world. God is the creator (Ecc 12:1). Everything on earth is 'the work of God who makes everything' (Ecc 11:5). God gives man life, possessions and honour if He wishes to do so (Ecc 5:19; 6:2), but it is also God who has given to man all the 'unhappy business' man is forced to be busy with (Ecc 1:13). It is God who made the world the way it is. 'Who can make straight what God has made crooked?' (Ecc 7:13; 1:15).

Kohelet realises that God must have had a purpose in all He did. But, for some appalling reason, God has not revealed this to man. Surrounded by a mad world man gropes in utter darkness. 'That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?' (Ecc 7:24). Man takes decisions without knowing what they will lead to. 'For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his useless life which he passes like a shadow?' (Ecc 6:12a). Man marches through life but may be snatched up by death at any unexpected moment. 'Man does not know his time' (Ecc 9:12). And what will happen after death? Kohelet sees but darkness and uncertainty. (Ecc 3:21; 6:12b; 8:7; 9:10).

'When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night one's eyes see sleep, then I saw all the work of God that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he cannot find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out' (Ecc 8:16-17).

'Who can tell man how it will be?' (Ecc 6:12b; 8:7). Only God could, if He wished to do so. But God maintains silence. God deliberately decided not to speak. Kohelet makes no bones about it. God makes us realise His power by his silence. 'God is in heaven and you are upon earth' (Ecc 5:2). 'God is testing the sons of men to

show them that they are but beasts' (Ecc 3:18). God gave man a mind that could reach out to eternal truths, but God stopped short of making man understand them.

'God has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end'. (Ecc 3:11)

Is it not remarkable and stimulating to find such words as the above recorded in inspired writing? In our endeavour to harmonise and reconcile, to 'plead the case for God' (Job 13:8), we tend to by-pass and obscure the terrifying silence of God. The world is more a madhouse than a home. God allows man to stumble in the dark. God keeps silent where He could speak. It is true, the revelation of His plan of love through Jesus Christ has lifted a tip of the veil. It has let through a glimmer of hope. But by and large the silence of God has not been broken. Alongside of His word we find a void of speech. Alongside the message of Christ we find His silence.

The devaluation of the word

Never before has man said so much as he says today. We live in an age of words. Words brim over from our schools and colleges. Words pour forth from the printing press, the public address system and the radio. Our cinema houses, our churches and our homes reverberate with words. And with this increase in the volume of words, the word as a value has suffered inflation.

Poets and novelists were the first to detect this devaluation. Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874-1929) expressed it as early as 1901 in the Chandos letter published in a Berlin newspaper.¹⁰ In it he witnessed to an increasing sense of uneasiness about the value of words. He felt a physical aversion to words like 'spirit', 'body', 'soul' and other platitudes, he said.

'People are tired of talking. They feel a deep disgust with words. For words have pushed themselves in front of things. This has awakened a deep love for all the arts that are executed in silence'.

Philosophers too pursued a new economy of words. In an attempt to pin down the exact value of human words Ludwig Wittgenstein advanced the thesis that language and this world are co-extensive.¹¹

'It is impossible to represent in language anything that "contradicts" logic as it is in geometry to represent by its co-ordinates a figure that contradicts the laws of space, or to give the co-ordinates of a point that does not exist' (3.032).

¹⁰ For a short description, cf. *World Literature in Digest Form*, ed. F. N. Magill, Vol. IV, Harper Row, New York, 1969, pp. 842-845. About the devaluation of words in European literature, cf. G. Steiner, 'Silence and the Poet', in *Language and Silence*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1967, pp. 57-76. Dr C. Kuipers has drawn my attention to the fact that Th. Carlyle had expressed a similar disgust with 'empty words' and the need for silence in 1833/34 (*Sartor Resartus*, Chapman, London 1888, pp. 36-37; 150-151).

¹¹ L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Routledge, New York 1922.

Wittgenstein admits realities that go beyond the world accessible to men. But they are beyond words too.

'There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical' (6.522).
'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence'(7).

The linguistic approach has brought a revolution to theology as well. 'The meaning of a word is its use in the language'.¹² This principle, which has become the source of many a new approach in theology, actually denotes a currency-value problem. As J. A. T. Robinson put it:

'In times of economic stability we do not give thought to what lies behind our paper money: we take it at its face value and use it as a readily acceptable means of communication and exchange. So in the field of theology; we make statements about God, we issue pronouncements about morals... But in our generation people are increasingly beginning to question whether in fact they *mean any thing* or stand for anything real. They ask for their backing for their cash value'.¹³

One reason for this theological inflation is the unbelievable ease and lightheartedness with which pronouncements flowed from the churches. For three centuries, from 1450-1750, perhaps as many as 200,000 innocent persons were executed as witches all over Europe. The facts are shocking, degrading and defy belief. Yet the persecution of witches was promoted by the writings and speeches of theologians, ministers and bishops, Catholic and Protestant alike.

'Throughout these centuries those who should by their birth, training, and position have been the conscience of the world, accepted the delusion and promoted it. Such men not only appealed to the emotions of religion, but perverted the entire structure of logic and reason. Everything was sacrificed to a preconceived prejudice. The logic of the demonologists, all highly educated men, leaders in their own discipline, is the most terrifying feature of witchcraft'.¹⁴

What wonder if the Christian word lost its currency value? Did the world not hear the acrimonious condemnation of the theory of evolution, of trade unions, of the film, of so many newly discovered values in modern society? The churches poured forth words and words on principles now obsolete. Words have had to be retracted. The trading power of the theological word has become weak indeed.

¹² L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1953, para. 43.

¹³ J. A. T. Robinson, 'The Debate Continues', in *The Honest to God Debate*, ed. D. L. Edwards, SCM London, 1963, p. 245.

¹⁴ R. H. Robbins, *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology*, Spring, London, 1959, 1970(6), p. 17. The information of the previous paragraph is also from this source.

On Saturday the 27th of July 1974 the House Judiciary Committee of the U.S.A. Congress voted to impeach President Richard M. Nixon. The vote came two full years after the Watergate burglary, years flooded with rivers of words; words spoken by witnesses in court, words printed in the papers, press conferences and presidential addresses to the nation. Slowly uncovered was a whole fabric of lies involving many political leaders: untruths, distortions, subterfuges, deceptions, dissimulations and perjuries. The first article of impeachment imputes to Richard M. Nixon 'making false or misleading statements to lawfully authorised investigative officers. . . , approving, condoning, acquiescing in, and counselling witnesses with respect to the giving of false or misleading statements. . . , making or causing to be made false or misleading public statements for the purpose of deceiving the people of the United States. . .'¹⁵ Watergate rocked the world not only because it affected one of the most powerful nations. It shook all into a new awareness of the duplicity and hollowness of words.

We live in an age when words are rightly mistrusted. 'The more words, the more uselessness, and what is man the better', says Kohelet (Ecc. 6:11). 'A fool multiplies his words' (Ecc. 10:14). 'Let your words be few' (Ecc. 5:2). The time seems ripe for swallowing our words and listening to silence.

Listening to Christ's Silence

Christ's silence at his passion, the theology of Kohelet and the twentieth century devaluation of the word, seemingly unconnected, point to a manner of experience of Christ which appears to be both factual, of crucial value to our times and yet frequently overlooked. It is my contention that Christ is in many ways communicating to us through his silence, but that we do not heed his message.

Let me from the outset eliminate some other meanings that could be given to the term, 'the silence of Christ', and which are not intended by me in the context of this paper. All great Christian mystics, with pseudo-Dennis the Areopagite, Ruysbroeck, St John of the Cross and Thomas Aquinas as their spokesmen, have always maintained that the higher stages of contemplation and mystical union with God require intellectual and emotional bonds that go beyond concepts and expression. God is met ultimately in a 'cloud of unknowing', in a 'dark night', in the 'super-essential radiance of the divine obscurity'. Christ and the soul are then enveloped in an 'unutterable silence', a silence that goes beyond words carrying as it does a reality that transcends human language¹⁶. This silence, related though it may be, is not the one intended by me in this study. I would also like to exclude the more common understanding of the term as spiritual desolation. Persons undergoing spiritual aridity in prayer sometimes speak of Christ being silent to them¹⁷. This silence also falls outside the immediate scope of my paper.

¹⁵ *Time*, August 5 (1974), pp. 20-21.

¹⁶ This silence is well described by Ch. Journet in *The Dark Knowledge of God*, Sheed and Ward, London 1948.

¹⁷ K. Rahner, *Encounters with Silence*, Sands, London 1960, 1966(11), pp. 19-25.

Communication analysts have come to accept the principle that a human being, if present to another human being, cannot not communicate with him¹⁸. By our very make-up we *have* to communicate. If we don't speak it is our silence itself that communicates. Thus it is with Christ. In the sanhedrin, in Herod's court, before Pilate's judgement seat and on Calvary he was there for all to see. He moved in the focus of the action. His personality dominated the scene. But 'He was silent'. It seems to me that Christ's silence demands our response whenever He makes his presence strongly felt but without speaking. It is this reticent and mute, but forceful presence of Christ I understand to be his silence.

Kohelet was confronted with the silence of God mainly in the agony of his fellow men. He saw 'the tears of oppressed' (Ecc 4:1), the darkness, grief, vexation, sickness and resentment of the common man (Ecc. 5:17). He observed how the 'righteous perish in their righteousness'. He was shocked because he knew God to be there: 'I know it will be well with those who fear God' (Ecc. 8:12). Kohelet was appalled by God's silence precisely because it was God Himself who made the day of adversity (Ecc 7:14). It was not the absence of God that troubled him, but the awful presence of the silent God. Kohelet might have been even more troubled if he had known, as we do, that God was to identify Himself fully with the oppressed in Jesus Christ: 'I was hungry and you gave me no food' (Mt 25:42). As I am writing these words more than a thousand delegates from many nations are gathered in Rome for the World Food Conference sponsored by the United Nations. The din of discussion on calorie intake, fertilizers, world food banks, agricultural economics and the Green Revolution cannot obliterate the agonizing silence of emaciated millions who cannot even ask for the food they need. The silence of Christ stares at us from the faces of the famished. The same amount of food that is feeding one average rich person, nutritionists point out, can feed a whole family of seven on an average poor man's diet¹⁹. If I am right and don't share till it hurts, I can justify my action with words, but I can never escape the silence of Christ.

Theology and Christ's Silence

Christian theologians should be very sensitive to the silence of Christ. As Ignatius pointed out: 'He that truly possesses the word of Jesus is able also to hearken unto his silence' (Eph 15). Unfortunately we theologians usually think of our job in terms of speaking and writing, of reflection (that is: words!) about the Word. Engrossed as we are in quoting one another and building castles of words, we run the danger of by-passing Christ. Allow me to return for a short time to the revolting example of witchcraft theology. The deluge of witch-hunting all over Europe was supported by theological writings, of which sixty may be listed as having been influential.

¹⁸ P. Watlawick, J. H. Beavin, D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communications*, New York 1967, ch. 2, para. 2.21.

¹⁹ 'The World Food Crisis' in *Time* November 11 (1974), pp. 22-29, esp. pg. 25.

The *Hammer of Witches* by Jakob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer, first published in 1486, saw at least sixteen German, eleven French, two Italian and six English editions in the next two centuries. For about one hundred years after its publication the *Hammer of Witches* ruled unchallenged except for three prominent theologians who opposed it: Champier, de Cassini and Ponzinibio. Their protest was overpowered by the many treatises justifying witch trials.

'What makes witchcraft so repellent, and morally lower than fascism, is that throughout civilized Europe, in every country (with the possible later exception of Holland), the clergy led the persecutions and condoned them in the name of Christianity'.²⁰

The procedure in witch trials was such that the accused was seldom given a fair chance to defend himself. Confessions were extracted by torture. Protestations of innocence were of no avail and were often construed as contrary evidence. It is impossible to read the documentation of the trials without being profoundly disturbed by the silence of Christ expressed in the victims' inability to speak. Johannes Junius, the burgomaster of Bamberg, wrote in a letter smuggled to his daughter:

'(My confession of witchcraft), it is all sheer lies and inventions, so help me God. For all this I was forced to say through dread of torture beyond what I had already endured. For they never cease the torture till one confesses something; be he ever so pious, he must be a witch. Nobody escapes, though he were an earl. If God send no means of bringing the truth to light, our whole kindred will be burned. God in heaven knows that I know not the slightest thing. I die innocent and as a martyr'.²¹

If such a prominent man as Junius could not defend himself, what about the many ordinary folk, the older men and women, and the children who were put to the same torture? A list dated 1629 identifies 157 persons executed in Wuerzburg during that year. Here follows an extract from the list:

'Nineteenth execution, six persons: A son of a nobleman from Rotenham was executed at six o'clock in the courtyard of the Town Hall, and his body burnt the following day.

The wife of Secretary Schellhar.

Another woman.

A boy, ten years old.

Another boy, twelve years old.

A baker's wife named Bruegler was burned alive'.²²

²⁰ R. H. Robbins, *Encyclopedia, etc.*, o.c. pg. 17. See also under 'Demonologists', pp. 123-126.

²¹ R. H. Robbins, *Encyclopedia, etc.*, o.c. pp. 12-13.

²² R. H. Robbins, *Encyclopedia, etc.*, o.c. pp. 555-557.

While twenty-one men and women were put to death at the Salem witch trials, the ministers Richard Baxter in Britain and Cotton Mather in the States gave their theological support, the former in his *Certainty of the World of Spirits* (1691), the latter by *Wonders of the Invisible World* (1693)²³. It is unbelievable that Christian theologians could be so immersed in their own reasonings that they failed to 'hearken unto the silence of Christ' speaking so manifestly in their victims.

Christ's Silence Today

I know that it is easy to criticise and condemn when after the lapse of centuries events can be judged in a more objective and detached manner. We have no reason to think ourselves better than theologians of four centuries ago. Confronted by the *Hammer of Witches* we too might have been inclined to accept it or be afraid to assail it in public. We are here touching the heart of the matter. Our theology is as vulnerable and as likely to go haywire as the pseudo-theology of the demonologists. We are as likely to overlook the silent Christ while spinning out our man-made inference. At the risk of extenuating my argument by overspecification, I will indicate some examples.

The caste system in India is abolished by the Constitution and is degrading to man. Many persons suffer severe psychological and social injustices on account of its enduring existence. Human caution in theology and practice even among Christians helps to uphold the system. Should we Christians not 'hearken to the silent Christ' in our weaker brethren and put up a more determined fight for their complete rehabilitation?

Great pressure weighs on our families in the matter of population control. Economic conditions are often such that more than two or three children cannot be supported. Many of our parents are socially and mentally not capable of maintaining voluntary abstinence or complicated methods of birth control. Quite a few Christian couples are in anguish about it and, when seeking guidance from their pastors, are driven away from the Church. While theology is groping for a formulation of adequate principles in the matter, should it not also heed the testimony of living Christian conscience? Some norms for human life can be deduced from Christ's Word; other ones may be more easily discovered if we listen to his silence.

The position accorded to women is far from satisfactory in the Church. Even if we ascribe a different role to women in the family and in society, we cannot with a clear Christian conscience accept the many forms of discrimination also found in Christianity itself. We live in a man-dominated world and the Church has inherited its share of male ascendancy. With an overwhelming predominance of men in the ministry and the theological sciences, is it likely that new forms of woman's participation in the breaking of the bread, in preaching and dispensing the other sacraments will be reasonably encouraged? Theology will have to reflect on Christ's word in this matter, but it should also listen to his silence.

²³ R. H. Robbins, *Encyclopedia, etc.*, o.c. pp. 44-45; 341-343.

As is clear from these examples, the silence of Christ can normally be heard in those who are socially inferior, in the 'underdogs'. But it is not just the silence of oppressed humanity. It is the silence of the *suffering Christ*. Christ identified himself with the sufferings of all men, and particularly with the sufferings of the witnesses to truth. It is in those human persons that we can forcefully experience the presence of Christ: his helplessness, his trust in the Father, his indignation at the unjust blows, his desolation, his inability to speak. And it seems to me, openness to this silence of the suffering Christ is not wholly unrelated to the silent awareness of Christ's mystical presence. The reason is that both spring from a perception of love. To man's *knowing* power God is 'evermore incomprehensible'; but to man's *loving* power, He is, in every man diversely, all comprehensible to the full.²⁴

²⁴ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. J. McCann, London 1936, p. 15.