



# Silence: A Christian History

By Diarmaid MacCulloch

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**A provocative meditation on the role of silence in Christian tradition by the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Christianity***

We live in a world dominated by noise. Religion is, for many, a haven from the clamor of everyday life, allowing us to pause for silent contemplation. But as Diarmaid MacCulloch shows, there are many forms of religious silence, from contemplation and prayer to repression and evasion. In his latest work, MacCulloch considers Jesus's strategic use of silence in his confrontation with Pontius Pilate and traces the impact of the first mystics in Syria on monastic tradition. He discusses the complicated fate of silence in Protestant and evangelical tradition and confronts the more sinister institutional forms of silence. A groundbreaking book by one of our greatest historians, *Silence* challenges our fundamental views of spirituality and illuminates the deepest mysteries of faith.

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## Editorial Review

Review

### Praise for *Silence*

“*Silence* has all the spark of *Christianity*. . . . In MacCulloch’s hands, reading about Christianity often feels as soulful, as silently consuming, as prayer itself.”

—Tom Bissell, *Harper’s Magazine*

“*Silence* is excellent: a beautifully written, factually dense, intellectually sophisticated look at the theological uses and abuses of silence, from the spirituality of quiet to the Catholic Church’s horrifying reticence about child abuse and the Holocaust.”

—Kathryn Schulz, *New York Magazine*

“A stimulating and sweeping overview.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Enjoyable and intelligent . . . MacCulloch is a gifted scholar and his ideas are always worth hearing.”

—*The Economist*

“In the first part of his compelling new book, Diarmaid MacCulloch explores the use of silence in spiritual practice, but it is in the second part that he constructs his main challenge. Here he speaks not of the lovely silence of that which cannot be spoken, but of the ugly silence that cloaks evil. . . . MacCulloch’s account is peppered with the kind of delicious asides that make him such a compulsively readable historian.”

—*The Times*, **Book of the Week**

“*Silence* is intellectually robust, and without the prevarications and self-qualifications that sometimes stymie academic prose. . . . MacCulloch is by turns precise, poetic and righteously indignant.”

—*The Guardian*

“MacCulloch is a superb raconteur, full of imagination, wit, irony and fun, who entertains, challenges, enlightens and occasionally enrages his readers. But beyond mere storytelling and the skilful display of his strength of learning, he also takes a strong ethical stance in telling the truth and revealing some of the darker sides of Christian history.”

—*The Times Higher Education*

“Unfailingly interesting and readable. . . . MacCulloch the sleuth historian enjoys nothing more than digging beneath this silence to reveal the smothered stories of variously disreputable Christian heroes.”

—*The Times Literary Supplement*

“This is a specialist book for non-specialist readers—by which I mean that it is made highly accessible to anyone seriously interested by excellent and lively writing . . . It is great fun . . . a rich engaging book. Read it.”

—*The Spectator*

About the Author

**Diarmaid MacCulloch** is a fellow of St. Cross College, Oxford, and professor of the history of the church at Oxford University. His books include *Suffolk and the Tudors*, winner of the Royal Historical Society's Whitfield Prize, and *Thomas Cranmer: A Life*, which won the Whitbread Biography Prize, the James Tait Black Prize, and the Duff Cooper Prize. A former Anglican deacon, he has presented many highly celebrated documentaries for television and radio, and was knighted in 2012 for his services to scholarship. He lives in Oxford, England.

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### **Introduction:**

#### *The Witness of Holmes's Dog*

My favourite dog in detective fiction is the dog that did not bark in the night-time, thus affording Sherlock Holmes the vital clue for solving Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's little mystery 'Silver Blaze'. The dog who guarded the stable of the racehorse Silver Blaze did not bark, because '[o]bviously the midnight visitor was someone whom the dog knew well'; it was in fact the racehorse's trainer, intent on villainy.[1] I am also fond of another dog, probably a deliberate *hommage* to Holmes, created by G. K. Chesterton in his Father Brown story 'The Oracle of the Dog'. The supposed oracle in question was the anguished howl of a dog who had swum out to sea to retrieve a walking stick, apparently at the exact time that the murder had taken place. Father Brown cheerily debunked the illusion that the dog had supernatural knowledge: the dog howled because it was cheated of its natural presuppositions about the walking stick. The object was in reality a sword stick, the murder weapon, and so it had sunk beneath the waves and could not be retrieved as a dog would expect of a stick. And the illusion that the howl coincided with the time of death was in fact a human contrivance.

The two tales come to the same conclusion. Conan Doyle reminds us that often one of the most significant scraps of evidence to illuminate a particular historical question is what is *not* actually done or said. Chesterton's premise might seem the reverse of Holmes's, since what is important is what the dog did, not what it did not do, but it is really the same: as he spells it out, 'A dog is a devil of a ritualist. He is as particular about the precise routine of a game as a child about the precise repetition of a fairy-tale.'[2] Chesterton's insight is as much about human anthropology as canine psychology. Like dogs, we are patternmaking animals. The historian's main task is to dig down to find these patterns, to reconstruct the crystalline structures in the actions and the pronouncements of people and to explain their meaning, as far as fragile and pattern-making human beings are capable of doing so. Only when we know the patterns well can we point out what is missing; what should be there, but is not.

Silence, then, is a vital part of what is missing in history, a necessary tool to help us make sense of the written and visual evidence that we possess. The novelist Margaret Atwood has observed that 'two and two doesn't necessarily get you the truth. Two and two equals a voice outside the window . . . The living bird is not its labelled bones.' Silence is a major part of that flesh in which the bones of positive historical evidence need clothing.[3] An example of a silence which has always fascinated me, from my first historical specialization in the sixteenth century, is the almost total absence of the Christian name Mark in late medieval and Tudor England, when the names of two of his fellow-Evangelists are common, and another, John, is overwhelmingly present. The one obvious exception which proves the rule, Anne Boleyn's unfortunate musician Mark Smeaton, might explain later Tudor silence by discrediting the name because he was executed for treasonous adultery with the queen, but does not account for what went before. This is one silence, apparently trivial, yet surely significant, for which so far I have found no good explanation. If we were to solve it, we might learn something new about the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The dogs of Holmes and Father Brown also tell us why history is such a subversive discipline, and why all its enquiries have a potentially transforming effect on the present: comfortable expectations are disrupted when we realize that the dog is not an oracle, but just a dog. Chesterton drew a breezily theistic moral from his story, which appears to be one of the main sources of the commonly repeated but apocryphal remark attributed to him that when people stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing, they believe in anything. His version in 'The Oracle of the Dog' was, 'It's the first effect of not believing in God that you lose your common sense and can't see things as they are.' [4] Whether or not we find Chesterton's homespun Thomism congenial, the method of Holmes and Father Brown is that of the critical historian, which naturally includes the historian of religion. It embodies a call to refocus, to see things as they are. Both the dog's silence in the night-time, and the dog's howl of bewilderment, are the clues which we really need.

There is a very considerable literature now on silence in religion; what might make this book different? I approach the subject out of a life spent in teaching and researching history, but also spent in fruitful encounters with Christian Churches and Christian lives. Religious patterns are among the most traceable and universally occurring in the fabric of human societies, and they have been at the centre of my life's business. All through my historical career, I have been keenly aware of the importance of silence in human affairs, for a good biographical reason: from an early age, I was conscious of being gay, and that proved to be a great blessing for a young historian. In the Britain of half a century ago, gay teenagers were keenly aware of what could not be said; of when to be silent and of how to convey messages in other ways. In much of the rest of the world, depressingly, those skills are still necessary. I was lucky to be able to face up to this challenge early on, was able to live life as I wished, and have enjoyed life much more as a result, but this life-experience has left me alert to the ambiguities and multiple meanings of texts, and to the ambiguities and multiple meanings in the behaviour of people around me. I have become attuned to listening to silence and to finding within it the keys to understanding many situations, far beyond anything to do with sexuality. Particularly in the still half-hidden

structures of gay sociability, there are all sorts of means of disclosure and concealment, ways of encoding meaning and subverting the mainstream assumptions of society. As a gay child and teenager, I also effortlessly developed the historian's other essential quality, a sense of distance: an observer status in the rituals constructed for a heterosexual society in a world which in reality was not quite like that. I did not need the jargon of post-modernism to teach me elementary survival strategies in this world of mirrors, just what Chesterton would have called common sense.

It will be apparent that the first sort of silence I encountered in my life was primarily an absence, exactly the sort of absence with which Doyle and Chesterton dealt: that of humans failing to make public or explicit the full range of patterns around which they were thinking and leading their lives. I shall be considering such absences of noise in the later part of this book, and also what happens when silence ends;

the recent history of sexuality has been one of the most dramatic examples of such phenomena. Inflexible pattern-makers get very angry when their patterns are under threat, or when others offer new patterns, or when it is pointed out that there are parts of the pattern missing; that is why so much conservative religion in the modern world seems so deeply and perpetually cross.

My own first experience thus predisposed me to deal with silence in religion primarily as evasion and wilful avoidance of truths. Yet experience has also taught me to recognize and enjoy the much more pleasing and edifying truth that silence may be positive as well as negative. Even at the most mundane level of human life, there are white lies, and there are things not said because it is kinder not to say them. But there is much more than that, and the book begins with different and arguably much more positive silences. The Christian faith is based on the assertion that there is more to an understanding of silence than simply the interaction of humans

with humans, or even of the interaction of humans with societies or landscapes around them. Whether or not one accepts the assumptions of theism (belief in a God), it belittles and impoverishes human experience not to treat seriously the Christian assertion of divinity, and it is the duty of any historian of religion to explore the working out of faith in the past with appropriate sympathy and understanding. Some will see that silences lie at the centre of religious experience, and will wish to affirm that they have had a profound and unfolding effect on the history of Christianity.

As I explore those silences which may be more than mere absence, I am painfully aware that a Gifford Lecturer more than a hundred years ago, William James, magisterially pre-empted me in this, in delivering the first version of one of his most important and influential books, *Varieties of Religious Experience*.<sup>[5]</sup> It has been daunting, first in the Gifford Lectures and now in this book, to follow in the wake of a writer who bequeathed us one of the foundational attempts to describe the nature of mysticism. Parts One to Three of this book nevertheless trace the theme through nearly three millennia of monotheism up to the beginning of the eighteenth century, as silence dances through the history not merely of Christianity, but of the religious ideas that fed into its first flourishing in the life and death of Jesus.

For silences are by no means the exclusive property of the Christian faith. Judaism, one of Christianity's two matrices, began a lively conversation about silence. Some silences were imported into Judaism and Christian belief from elsewhere – a very great deal from the Greek culture which provides Christianity's other main parent, or perhaps from even further afield. Some may still be in the course of discovery. All these varied discussions of silence may have a problematic relationship to the discourse from which the Christian faith is constructed, in which one foundation strand, based on the Gospel of John, gives Jesus the Christ the name 'Word', or rather calls him by the Greek word which means so much more than simply 'word'. *Logos* is the whole act of speech, or the structured thought behind the speech, and from there its meanings spill outwards into conversation, narrative, musing, meaning, reason, report, rumour, even pretence.

How does silence relate to the Christ who is *Logos*? The series of Gifford Lectures from which this book sprang was of course an incarnation of that problem. No doubt many of those at my lectures savoured the incongruity of their lecturer talking for six hours about silence, but I thought that the Principal and University might feel that their money had been ill-spent if I simply stood there mute for the allotted time and collected my fee and travel-expenses. It is hardly a new problem: we have been arguing vociferously about how to talk about silence, from the first efforts of Christian theologians in the second century to create a distinctively Christian 'negative theology', through to Theodor Adorno's critique of Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous remark about what to do with that about which we cannot speak.<sup>[6]</sup> One of the aims of this book is to explore this 'negative theology'. It is a technical term of art for theologians, whose connotations are far from negative, unlike the pejorative sense of that word now commonly used in everyday conversation. Instead, 'negative theology' promises a fruitful road into divinity, based on a tradition stretching all the way back to Greek philosophy and some of the strands within the Hebrew Scriptures. We shall be meeting that tradition a great deal.

What follows can only be a sketch, or the starting of a number of hares. And it is in the nature of the starting of hares that the hares are thereby in grave danger of death. Any critical historian of Christianity is in the same peril. Arnaldo Momigliano (1908–87), a great historian of antiquity, who as one of his admiring students observed 'refused to distinguish between scholarship and life', commented with a mixture of ruefulness and zest about the specially combative nature of expounding the history of religion: 'Other historians can be satisfied with simply retelling the past. The chances that they will be challenged are few. The historian of the Church knows that at any point he will be challenged. The questions with which he deals are controversial. And the controversy is never one of pure dogma or of pure fact – the two are interrelated.'<sup>[7]</sup>

As my probing progresses, critics will observe that it becomes biased towards the history of the Western Church of the Latin Rite and its successors in Protestantism and post-Reformation Roman Catholicism. There is rich material in that history, but I am acutely aware that it is a distorted sample of Christian experience, and that more might be said about Orthodox Christianity as well as the non-Chalcedonian Churches which for several centuries seemed to be the future in Christian development. Previously I have done my best, both on the printed page and on camera, to introduce a perspective on the Christian past which gives a proper place to these Eastern stories. So I feel rueful about my omissions now, but I can do no more than point out the problem before someone else does. In particular, one distortion of a more balanced Christian history (particularly a history of Christian silence) is provided by the accident that the Western Latin Christian tradition has been in a position of worldly power for more of its history than any other branch of Christianity. Those who have a particular reverence for the Church in communion with the Holy See will no doubt feel that I have been unduly hard on it. If they do, my regrets are not very fulsome. As we know from many walks of life, the powerful often have a lot to hide, and they strive to regulate the right to silence.

Power is often sustained by distortions of truth or reality, particularly when power takes the form of claiming a monopoly on truth. It is hardly surprising, then, that Christianity's most lasting and powerful monarchy, the papacy, has gathered to itself more silences of shame and distortion of the truth than other sources of authority in the Christian tradition. Yet Protestants should not be complacent; in their days of power, they have had a good deal to answer for as well. The ending of many of Christianity's less than admirable silences is the result of the Western Churches' loss of inappropriate worldly power, as the long Constantinian era appears to have come to its end. The powerful are likewise inclined to monopolize noise: so, for instance, Churches in positions of power have announced their dominant presence by the ringing of bells, and when Churches have been deprived of power, as by the Ottomans or the Bolsheviks, the bells have been silenced.[8] We have had to strain very hard to listen to some of the voices of the powerless throughout the Christian story; and among the histories of the powerless, I number the last thousand years of non-Chalcedonian Christian history, about which, alas, I go on to say little. From the stories of power, Christianity may learn a lesson. Strident proclamation has many dangers, and silence has its own eloquence. Sometimes, as we shall see, the gap between them can be bridged by laughter.

I opened by recalling two stories from the classic age of murder mysteries, and will be pleased if the reader treats this book as a detective story. In the best traditions of that genre, it seeks to see a pattern behind apparent chaos: to draw together matters which at first sight seem completely unrelated to each other, still less directly relevant to a quest for silence. It leaves a trail of clues whose importance may not be immediately obvious, but which will, I hope, fall into place as we stand in the drawing room at the end of the tale, like Hercule Poirot, to look back on its tangles and draw out their meaning. In the early stages of the quest, particularly as we seek silence in the pages of the Bible, the picture may not seem wholly in focus; but I trust that the reader will enjoy the later reappearance of these early scenes: how Hannah's encounter with a priest at Shiloh fired imaginations more than two millennia later, or what lessons for modern Christians about silence can be drawn from another dialogue, between the ultimate antagonists, Christ and Satan, over forty days in the Wilderness.

It is also of the essence of the satisfying detective story that it is linear, moving forward as events happen. In some respects I have occasionally breached the conventions of the genre, pointing forward to some future recurrence or expansion of a particular theme, but one important observance of the rule may initially cause puzzlement: I give the collection of books which Christians know as the Old Testament a name which most of them will not recognize, *Tanakh*. This word Tanakh is a symbolic acronym, apparently coined in medieval Judaism, and formed from the three initial Hebrew letters of the three category-names of books which traditional Jewish scholarship has regarded it as containing: Law, Prophets and Writings. It has the advantage of suggesting the variety of the contents of these books, but there is something more important for our

purposes: it avoids imposing on an independent body of literature the theologically loaded later Christian title of 'Old Testament'. We need to appreciate its contents on its own terms, free of the meanings found in it by the sect of first-century Judaism which, in the light of the life and death of Jesus, became Christianity.

Readers who reach as far as my remarks on the contribution made by Paul of Tarsus to this story will note that the early Christian communities which he founded or encouraged were not the best settings in which to encounter silence. It is only fair to point out that in one of the most famous passages of his letters to his protégés at Corinth, Paul makes a statement which could be regarded as the wash behind the painting in this book. While writing to Christians at Corinth, Paul succinctly presents a polarity which exists in all religious expression: that between words and being – and conspicuously not that between words and action:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am  
a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and  
understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as  
to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all  
I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain  
nothing.[9]

In Christian terms, though (startlingly) with no overt Christian reference, Paul presents his Corinthian friends with the subject of their common faith: the condemned Christ. The Christ of Paul's faith is helpless in agony on the Cross, yet for Paul and for those who follow the Christian way, the crucified one is more powerful in his silent suffering than any power of this world or even of the next. In the pages which follow, we meet some of those who over twenty centuries have reached out towards the same vision.

[1] 'Silver Blaze', in A. Conan Doyle, *Sherlock Holmes . . . the Complete Short Stories* (London, 1928), 331.

[2] 'The Oracle of the Dog', in G. K. Chesterton, *The Father Brown Stories* (London, 1929), 643.

[3] M. Atwood, *The Blind Assassin* (London, 2000), 395.

[4] Chesterton, 'The Oracle of the Dog', 648. For an acerbic comment on the myth of this supposed quotation, see D. Johnson, 'Overrated: Umberto Eco', *Standpoint* (March 2012).

[5] W. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, Centenary Edition (London and New York, 2002). For James's discussion on the characteristics of mysticism, see *ibid.*, lectures 16 and 17 (pp. 294–332).

[6] The paradox is perceptively discussed in J. G. Finlayson, 'On Not Being Silent in the Darkness: Adorno's Singular Apophaticism', *HTR* 105 (2012), 1–32, especially at pp. 9–10, with reference to Adorno's critique of Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, proposition 7: 'What we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence.'

[7] A. Momigliano, *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles,



1990), 136–7 (I am indebted to Sam Baddeley for pointing me towards that observation). The characterization of Momigliano is to be found in his obituary by O. Murray, in *Journal of Roman Studies*, 77 (1987), p. xi.

[8] In his pioneering essay on noise pollution, Theodor Lessing pointed to the Christian proselytizing programme announced by the omnipresence of church bells: T. Lessing, 'Ueber den Lärm', *Nord und Sud*, 97 (April 1901), 71–84, at pp. 79–80, quoted in L. Baron, 'Noise and Degeneration: Theodor Lessing's Crusade for Quiet', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 17 (1982), 165–78, at p. 166.

[9] 1 Cor. 13.1–3.

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