

## Noise of Violent Human Speech and the Restraint of Contemplative Silence

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**Abstract:** This essay assumes that violent human speech is a form of noise. It argues that linguistic integrity is primarily a function of a “silent mind” soaked in silence—a silence which is not a mere absence of words, a type of passive protest, or a state of unspeakable suffering, but the spacious, fertile, and transfiguring ground of human speech because it is the boundless yet contingent “temple of divine presence”. This study is developed through the Judeo-Christian *praxis* and *theoria* of contemplative silence, using biblical, early Christian, and contemporary sources: The First Temple tradition, those of the desert fathers/abbas and mothers/ammats, and from Anglican solitary Maggie Ross with her “work of silence.” Thus, contemplative silence is argued 1) in its more restraining reconstructive potential for some imagined social order and 2) beyond restraint, in the habit of contemplative silence that leads toward a more peaceful, compassionate society.

**Keywords:** Language, noise, violence, contemplative silence, Temple theology, desert spirituality, Maggie Ross

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## Introduction

Asian cultures in general,<sup>1</sup> and Filipinos' in particular, exhibit certain "oral modes of thought and expression."<sup>2</sup> Foronda wrote in his seminal article on oral history that the "Filipino is by and large a talking, rather than, a writing individual, and rare is the Filipino statesman, artist, educator, diplomat, military man, or government official, who would spend time writing memoirs."<sup>3</sup> Spoken, heard words do have magnetic suasion for Filipinos. Filipinos use video chat.<sup>4</sup> Gossiping remains a cultural artefact.<sup>5</sup> Graduation

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Patricia Lim Pui Huen, James H. Morrison & Kwa Chong Guan, eds., *Oral History in Southeast Asia: Theory and Method* (Singapore: National Archives of Singapore, 1998).

<sup>2</sup>Recent work on Philippine orality is Merlie M. Alunan, ed., *Susumaton: Oral Narratives of Leyte* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2016). Gerard Rixhon, ed., *Voices from Sulu: A Collection of Tausug oral Traditions* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2010).

For a sustained and detailed treatment on orality and textuality, see the well-known work of Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>3</sup>Marcelino A. Foronda, Jr., "Oral History in the Philippines: Prospects and Trends," p.11 at <https://ejournals.ph/article.php?id=5054>. See also *Kasaysayan: Studies on Local and Oral History* (Manila, Philippines: De La Salle University Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup>Viber is said to be the most popular social media these days in terms of public chats and getting daily news because of instant and constant interaction with messaging apps unlike Twitter or Facebook. <http://preen.inquirer.net/35366/public-chats-are-gods-gift-to-news-readers#ixzz4PN8IjNPx> by Jacqueline Arias.

<sup>5</sup>Academicians John Sabini and Maury Silver at one point appeared before the academic court and lawyered for gossip, turning gossip into a defendant against its accusers. While they penned that "gossip is a curious pleasure and a sin," and that it has its own vices, their whole chapter "A Plea for Gossip" argues on the positive moral character of gossiping. These values include self-clarification of moral principles and stand, a sense of intimacy by excluding others, finding "support for people's outrage," and becoming "heroes of a

ceremonies and formal gatherings are capped with speakers, and political rallies with angry ideologues. Entertaining conversationalists, storytellers, dramatic homilists, confident presentors in public fora of marketable products or ideas, dynamic retreat facilitators, lawyers, bar comedians, hilarious teachers, crooners, emphatic movie villains – they usually are the crowd-drawers, with the most avid fans and Twitter followers.

But because the oral modes remain the currency of public and private communication, oral power could also be taken for granted, and thus unwittingly morphs into linguistic noise and violence;<sup>6</sup> a noisy orality that goes beyond the mechanical definition of noise as “*unwanted sound*” into something political as “a signifier of an ideological power, an insensitivity to the natural rhythms of human existence.”<sup>7</sup> An orality has transmogrified into its violent expression if by violence we mean “every action or lack of action of persons or cultures (including customs, institutions, structures) that are *insensitive* to and *oppressive* of human persons who have been created according to the divine image

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moral drama with a minimum of inconvenience,” *Moralities of Everyday Life* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1982), 89-106. In monastic tradition, gossiping is simply sinful that monks must refrain from committing. The tradition adhered to the psychology of “inner demons” and monks believed that the demonic was an “extension of the self,” the sum of “all that was anomalous and incomplete in man.” Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1993), 193.

<sup>6</sup>From a social science perspective, philosopher William C. Gay has written extensively on linguistic violence and linguistic nonviolence. Cf. “The Role of Language in Justifying and Eliminating Cultural Violence,” DOI 10.1163/9789004361911\_004. Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2018, 32-63.

<sup>7</sup>Stuart Sim, *Manifesto for Silence: Confronting the Politics and Culture of Noise* (George Square, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 93.

and likeness.”<sup>8</sup> If it is *oppressive* and *insensitive*, therefore it is *unwanted* by our senses. Holocaust survivor Primo Levi issued a hunch on this type of linguistic violence when he argued that “whoever does violence to human beings...is bound also to do violence to language.”<sup>9</sup> That systemic violence in ‘human speech’ can go hand in hand with the violent human deaths and criminalities in the country is no longer a matter of a wild conjecture. A glaring example was the day President Duterte issued a statement against the victims of the Holocaust, telling his audience that if Germany had Hitler who exterminated millions of Jews and people are pondering of his Hitlerian propensity, then, he would be “happy to slaughter” three million drug addicts in the country. There was moral gravity to the speech as it was promotional of violence, condemnatory of lost innocent lives, and a trivialization of more ordinary lives ever imperiled by the seemingly perpetual social forces of deprivation and systemic inequality. On the Solemnity of All Saints this year, the President issued this controversial statement: “These f\*cking Catholics, why do they observe All Souls’ Day and All Saints’ Day? We don’t even know who those

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<sup>8</sup>Gerald Arbuckle, *Violence, Society, and the Church: A Cultural Approach* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2009), xii, italics supplied.

<sup>9</sup>Victor Brombert, *Musings on Mortality: From Tolstoy to Primo Levi* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 151. Primo Levi was an Italian chemist and writer who was brought to Auschwitz as a Jewish prisoner. He survived the Holocaust by working as a chemist for the Third Reich in producing synthetic rubber for its warfare. Thirty years after his exit from Auschwitz, he allegedly committed suicide by jumping from the fourth floor of a building. Writers, including Elie Weisel thought it was most likely “survival shame” that drove him to self-destruction. Princeton professor Brombert thought Levi’s most personal and original work is The Periodic Table.

saints are. Who are those stupid saints? They're just drunkards,"<sup>10</sup>

There have been some clamor both from the domestic front to the wider, global political communities for a more 'restrained and refined speech' on the part of the President. The President in turn threw a volley of charges, calling his critics hypocritical and meddling but out of which oppositional and hegemonic partisan and global forces are also tasked either to become defensive or hold in honesty their own accountabilities for past acts of violence they inflicted on the public. The political mudslinging and paranoia have become staple news and noise, a case of a communication impasse, a social phenomenon that social theorist Niklas Luhmann mused about, on how communication functions arbitrarily in society:

A communication does not communicate (*mitteilen*) the world, it divides (*einteilen*) it.

Like any operation of living or thinking, communication produces a caesura. It says what it says; it does not say what it does not say. It differentiates. If further communications connect (*anschließen*), systemic boundaries form which stabilize the cut.<sup>11</sup>

Communication cuts like a knife. "Some things are destroyed in the speaking, already lost in any translation."<sup>12</sup> 'Human speech' has the power to create a bloody event. For Luhmann, every mode of speaking in society is a mode of marginalization and exclusion. Yet,

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<sup>10</sup>Ian Nicolas Cigaral, 'Santo Rodrigo': Duterte pokes fun at Catholic 'All Saints Day'. See, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2018/11/02/1865300/santo-rodrigo-duterte-pokes-fun-catholic-all-saints-day#65DFDVE6B6MdgO12.99>

<sup>11</sup>Niklas Luhmann. "Reden und Schweigen." Trans. Kerstin Benhke, "Speaking and Silence," from Peter Fuch and Niklas Luhmann, *Reden und Schweigen* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), 25.

<sup>12</sup>Karmen MacKendrick, *Immemorial Silence* (New York, NY: State University Press of New York, 2001), 3.

society always communicates and hence, the perpetual including and excluding which Luhmann considers as a ‘communicative paradox’. How then is this paradox resolved? A schema he proposes is by way of this question: “Who can observe with the help of the distinction between *speaking* and *silence*, that is, who can communicate about this distinction?”<sup>13</sup> This essay will deal with this question as it focuses on contemplative silence.

By way of analogy, contemplative silence attempts to name the dis-ease and discontent over violent human speech, while posting silence as one option of addressing social wounds tangible in society’s communication impasses, or systemic contradictions. Contemplative silence heals.<sup>14</sup> But the restlessness must be named first, embraced, or provoked through some honest discourses. The *praxis* and *theoria* of the 3 strands of contemplative silence in this essay – biblical, early Christianity, and Maggie Ross – would be countercultural, and resonant with Llosa’s idea of a “good book,” are posted as critique to the noise of violent human speech in our cultural timeline.<sup>15</sup> Jerome Berryman goes as far as arguing that

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<sup>13</sup>Luhmann, p.25. Luhmann is a positivist sociologist who does not subscribe even to the possibility of a ‘transcendent silence’ at least in this expository article on silence.

<sup>14</sup>See, Maggie Ross lecture at Durham University on “Healing Silence,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9CEsE1nGas0>.

<sup>15</sup>An epistemological criterion was laid out at one point by Peruvian novelist and 2010 Nobel Laureate in Literature Mario Vargas Llosa regarding the question on what makes a good book when he spoke of it terms of its capacity to “develop some kind of malaise or dissatisfaction of the world.”<sup>15</sup> A “good book” for Llosa stirs an uneasiness over the currencies of the time, especially those that curtail basic individual freedom by way of violent regimes. Juanio Arcellana, “Vargas Llosa on reading, fast becoming a lost art,” November 14, 2016, *The Philippine Star* at <https://beta.philstar.com/lifestyle/arts-and-culture/2016/11/14/1642188/vargas-llosa-reading-fast-becoming-lost-art#34OW7TE8gMjQiURs.99>.

the “loss of silence in our culture will result in the loss of religious meaning and the impairment of creativity.”<sup>16</sup> Voices of contemplative silence beckon for the time to again befriend, or re-friend silence, to navigate its waters of critique of the disorders of ‘human speech’ and attune to the euphony of its fiery nonviolence.

### **Contemplative silence as reconstructive response to Luhmann**

The Judeo-Christian Tradition has strands of answer to Luhmann’s dilemma running through its beautiful but convoluted traditions of *contemplative silence* which offer acute ways of distinguishing between ‘*speaking* and *silence*’. More than its power to distinguish, this typology of silence is even considered subversive to human speech, the one that is marked by noise, or any noise that is a by-product of human toil. Contemplative silence has the potential as a theological reference for what Anglican scholar Rowan Williams hinted as “abundant or ‘excessive’ reality engulfing our mental activities so that our language does strange things under its pressure.”<sup>17</sup> Beyond Luhmann’s sociological perspective, contemplative silence offers ways of deepening or correcting ‘human speech’ enveloped by the superficiality of noise or violence. It is a more

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Mario Vargas Llosa was conferred the Doctorate in Literature *honoris causa* by the De La Salle University on November 8, 2016. The Nobel Prize Committee honored him “for his cartography of structures of power and his trenchant images of the individual's resistance, revolt, and defeat,” [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2010/](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2010/)

<sup>16</sup>Jerome W. Berryman, “Silence is stranger than it used to be: teaching silence and the future of humankind,” *Religious Education* 94/3 (Summer 1999): 257.

<sup>17</sup>Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the habits of language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 7.

holographic but paradoxical way of responding to communication impasses becoming more common in a society marked by violent abuses of the mind and body by way of systemic corruption, or drug addiction and the violence engendered by its deterrence.

The history of contemplative silence is replete with nuances, images, interpretations, and even controversies. It is a myriad of images and scholars of spirituality (of which silence is a subset) do acknowledge silence's long, complex, dappled, or trampled history. In his masterful study, Diarmaid MacCulloch has traced the Christian history of silence from its roots in the Tanakh to the New Testament and its innovations in the succeeding periods of monasticism, Reformations up to our contemporary time.<sup>18</sup> Viewed largely from the history of the Western church, MacCulloch though admits that in spite of "rich materials" from the West and Latin Rite, the Western experience remains a "distorted sample of Christian experience" given that Western Christianity, and its habitus of silences, was constrained for centuries in the contested ground of imperial power. Even the Tanakh tradition, according to MacCulloch, can easily complicate our contemporary understanding of silence when its observance from a Jewish faith had less to do with stillness (though a part of the tradition) and more to do with disasters, defeat, deprivation, or one's silent death in Sheol, and how the silence of God provoked "protests, expostulation and anguished supplication" expressed in the recitation of the Psalms at the Temple.

Theorized silence has come a long way, from the time of the classical Greek period and how it has been woven and embodied through the poly-images and valences of past and present eras. Indeed, current literature on

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<sup>18</sup>Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (Penguin Books: New York, 2013).



contemplative silence,<sup>19</sup> written through different hermeneutical lenses, has mushroomed and it may be an indication of a response to the need to redress the dehumanizing noise of linguistic violence of our time. Alternatively, some theological hermeneutics and re-appropriation of Biblical/Temple-inspired silence, desert-based silence, and the ‘work of silence’ of Maggie Ross may ground the above exposition on linguistic noise, violence and impassés.

### **First Temple tradition<sup>20</sup> and contemplative silence**

The noun “contemplative” has always been associated with something spiritual or religious, both within and outside of Christianity, although its transitive verb “contemplate” has acquired a number of neutral meanings ranging from pensive looking to intending or anticipating, to seriously considering. The American Heritage Dictionary dissects the word between the

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<sup>19</sup>Cf. Nancy Billias & Sivaram Vemuri, *The Ethics of Silence: An Interdisciplinary Case Analysis Approach* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Malgorzata Grzegorzewska, Jean Ward & Mark Burrows, eds., *Breaking the Silence: Poetry and the Kenotic Word* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2015); Diego Irarrázaval, et. al., eds., *Silence. Concilium* 2015/5. London: SCM Press, 2015); George Prochnik, *In Pursuit of Silence: Listening for Meaning in a World of Noise* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2010); Karmen MacKendrick *Immemorial Silence* (New York, NY: State University Press of New York, 2001).

<sup>20</sup>Old Testament independent scholar Margaret Barker has made trailblazing studies on Temple theology, incisively showing the profound distinctions between the First Temple tradition and the Second Temple tradition, favoring the former as more “mystical” in its liturgical praxis, and the latter as more legalistic after Josiah introduced the reform of the Temple by divesting its many symbols including the anointing with oil among others. Cf. Margaret Barker, *Temple Mysticism: An Introduction* (London, UK: SPCK, 2011).

prefix *com* for intensive and *templum* as a space for observing auguries or divination, rendering a more polytheism-inspired understanding. The Ancient Near East cultures were centered around cultic practices, including divination, in temples.<sup>21</sup>

From a Jewish perspective, and as a practical derivative from their neighboring ancient cultures, “contemplation” has evolved into a monotheistic act of adoration that took place in the Jewish Temple, the very center of Jewish life. The Temple worship in Jerusalem was “generally extremely noisy”<sup>22</sup> because prayers primarily had to be vocal based on the assumption that “Yahweh demanded praise that could be heard.” Also, animal butchery for sacrificial offering during major feasts became part of this cultic noise.<sup>23</sup> Amidst the liturgical noise though was infused an intentional silence.<sup>24</sup> This grand silence begins when the assigned priest enters the Holy Place to burn the incense. By then, every activity in the Temple ceases, and those in the inner court withdraw from the area, while those outside the Temple fall down with hands outstretched. Complete silence fills the Temple area. In a positive sense, this silence gestures their complete submission to their Royal God, and in a negative sense, an adamant refusal to submit to the royal kings and gods and goddesses of their neighboring cultures.<sup>25</sup> Because the

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<sup>21</sup>Micha Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings: Temples and Divine Presence in the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013).

<sup>22</sup>MacCulloch, 14.

<sup>23</sup>Peter J. Leithart has a more nuanced argument that animal slaughter in the “Mosaic tent” tradition (different from the First Temple tradition) was done in silence. Cf. *From Silence to Song: The Davidic Liturgical Revolution* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 54.

<sup>24</sup>Anne Punton, *The World of Jesus: Beliefs and Customs from the Time of Jesus* (Oxford, OX: Lion Hudson, 2009), 175-176.

<sup>25</sup>This is not to deny the fact also that King Solomon built the

Temple is also an imagined worship in Heaven, the visionary author of the book of Revelation picked up this core Temple motif of heavenly worship and silence in chapter 8, verse 1: “When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.”

A couple of psalmodies recited in the Temple that gave prominence to silence are Psalms 19: 1-4:<sup>26</sup>

The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.  
day unto day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;  
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.

and Psalm 37: 7: “Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him...”

Walter Brueggemann and William Bellinger, two prominent scholars on the Hebrew Psalter, consider the whole Psalm 19 as a poetic hymn of praise to the creator. The imagery of the firmament or heaven proclaiming divine glory in silence or “unheard sound” symbolizes the infinite openness of this glory to everyone, and by extension, to those who can attend in silence to this silent praise. Psalm 37 verse 7 on the other hand is found in the midst of the psalmody’s dialectics: between the prosperity and success of the wicked and evil schemes in the world and the challenge of trusting the providence of God for those who remain

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First Temple as a political and economic strategy of control of the religious sphere, and how the structure was built on the sweat and blood of the laborers of the monarchy and a burdensome taxation system to support the project, as recounted in 1 Kings chaps. 1-9.

<sup>26</sup>Bible verses are from the Revised Standard Version.

faithful in spite of their stumbles.<sup>27</sup> To “be still” or silent in the whole context of the psalmody is to listen or wait in patience on God’s reliable providence.<sup>28</sup>

A contemporary of prophet Ezekiel during the pre-Babylonian conquest and destruction of the First Temple, prophet Habakkuk was also known for his advocacy of Temple-based silence as an affirmation of and humility before divine power and silence as a weapon against the imperial violence of the Chaldeans: “But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.”<sup>29</sup> From the Hebrew Scriptures, a common Jewish source of inspiration on the interplay of contemplative silence and speech is through the Hebrew word *chashmal* for gleam of amber, an image used by Prophet Ezekiel alone for one of his visions. This compound word could be dissected into *chash* for silence, and *millel* for speaking. *Chasmal* is translated into Greek as *electrum* and the Talmud posits that to be charged by the *electrum*, the Holy Light and Fire, is to cut one’s speaking (*mal*) first and be silent (*chash*) in adoration.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, *Psalms* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 100-103 & 208-214 respectively.

<sup>28</sup>For an in-depth exposition of the interchangeable sense or meaning of “stillness” and “silence,” especially in the account of Elijah’s “still, small voice” in 1 Kings 19: 12, cf. Eric D. Reymond’s syntactical study, “The Hebrew Word דָּמָם and the Root *d-m-m* I (“To Be Silent”),” *Biblica* 90/3 (2009): 374-388. The study attempts to settle the debate whether the Hebrew word for “still” in Elijah’s account means “whisper” or “silence” and Reymond argues for the latter.

<sup>29</sup>Hab. 2:20.

<sup>30</sup>Chaim Bentorah, “Word Study - The electricity of God,” <http://www.chaimbentorah.com/2015/06/word-study-the-electricity-of-god/> accessed 06 Oct. 2018.

## **Desert fathers and mothers and contemplative silence**

The Temple sense of contemplative silence has run long and deep in the Judeo-Christian traditions – from the Jewish prophetic, apocalyptic, Kabbalistic, Hasidic, Rabbinic mystical traditions to Jesus’ habit of solitary prayer in the desert; from the habitus of silence of the desert fathers and mothers to the monastic spirituality of the West and the emerging neo-monasticism of the present.

The silent lives of the early Christians in the desert began around 250 A.D. and during the height of persecution by the Roman imperial power. By 311 A.D., Christians were allowed to practice their faith through the Edict of Toleration. A year after, Constantine espoused the Christian religion and the toleration of Christians and their practices were further cemented. Eventually, Constantine legalized Christianity as the official State religion, lavishing it with wealth and respectability to the extent that “imperial Christianity came to follow the political division of the empire.”<sup>31</sup> It was in this growing worldliness of Christianity, amidst the noise of worldly ecclesiastical and political power, of religious squabbles and violence especially toward the non-Christians and “heretics” that some started to hunger for a Gospel-based peace. Basic to this longing was to renounce the superficialities that Christianity had bowed into, and pursue the depth and simplicity of Christian discipleship after the humble, non-imperial Christ. They were in search of a “new temple” that would insulate them from the imperial noise, and bow in silent adoration to the “true King.” This “new temple” was the silent desert. It was an ordinary longing from

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<sup>31</sup>Diarmuid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 2009), 427.

ordinary Christians whose residence in the desert and its demanding silence was initially piqued by a certain angst: that their fledgling, growing faith and life of prayer was now compromised and could no longer be nourished by the “noise, triviality, and rootlessness around them.”<sup>32</sup>

After more than one thousand and five hundred years, conversations and discourses about the desert *abbas* and *ammās* have not ceased, and one obvious reason is that the multivalent virtues they passed on through their Sayings and aphorisms still resonate with every generation’s profound thirst for *simplicity, obscurity, self-restraint, patience, humility, detachment, compassion, integrity, vulnerability, or sense of mortality*. Their imperfect and paradoxical lives, can open up to a source of wisdom and moral compass.

So many of their insightful discoveries offer a plethora of practical wisdom, even to this day. Like challenging Zen koans, they coined wisdom sayings to clarify the difference between mechanical devotion and spiritual maturity.<sup>33</sup>

What was the wellspring of their teaching authority and voice? Monasticism scholar Douglas Burton-Christie believed that they “spoke words of authority, though it was often in their silence that they were most eloquent.” In Christie’s very insightful study, the disposition of the desert fathers and mothers toward language is one of careful attention:

...examining the way words work, how and when one should speak, and above all how to develop integrity of life and words. Their concern with words also helps to

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<sup>32</sup>Alan J. Placa & Brendan P. Riordan, *Desert Silence: A Way of Prayer for an Unquiet Age* (New York: Living Flame Press, 1977), 20.

<sup>33</sup>Justin Langille, “There is Nothing Between God and You: Awakening to the Wisdom of Contemplative Silence,” *Sewanee Theological Review* 50/3 (Pentecost 2007): 375.

explain why such importance was attached to silence in the desert. Silence not only prevented one from using language in a harmful way but also provided the fertile ground out of which words of power could grow and through which these words could bear fruit in lives of holiness.<sup>34</sup>

Silence was central to their contemplative life: the silence of adoration; silence before the Word in Scriptures; silence before a wise elder; silence as the ground of their desire for purity of heart, and from silence as their speaking platform ensued their ‘human speech’ of kindness, gentleness, humor, or searing self-honesty. Silence as the very measure of discerning the “wheat from the chaff” as gleaned from this aphorism:

...A man may seem to be silent, but if his heart is condemning others he is babbling ceaselessly. But there may be another who talks from morning till night and yet he is truly silent; that is, he says nothing that is not profitable.<sup>35</sup>

It was a world of orality they inhabited, yet they allowed silence as “the final word.”<sup>36</sup>

### **Maggie Ross and her ‘work of silence’**

Maggie Ross is a publicly professed Anglican Solitary under the protection of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Other than inhabiting silence, she has written extensively on the subject and her writings deserve both careful study and practical application. Silence for her is

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<sup>34</sup>Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford, OX: Oxford University Press, 1993), 146.

<sup>35</sup>Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Cistercian Publications: Oxford, 1975), 171.

<sup>36</sup>Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 3.

primarily a praxis before it becomes a *theoria* so that one must first inhabit silence to commit to her ‘work of silence’. “Silence can’t be taught. You just have to sit down and do it.”<sup>37</sup>

“Silence is context and end”<sup>38</sup> is the seabed of the ‘work of silence’ grounding all other theses of Ross. From this ground, silence could be understood either from a non-religious or religious approach: “the work of silence is neutral.”<sup>39</sup> To understand ‘silence as context’, one must be ushered into two types of “consciousness,” two types of “knowing,” two ways of “behaving” in the world, two ways of embodying one’s embodiment in the world, or two “minds.” The ‘left consciousness,’ the *linear mind*’ for Ross, has two potentials: either it proceeds in the world tendentiously caught in its assertive self-referentiality, as if the self is the only thing that exists, or one’s views about the world, or methods of knowing the truth are the only valid ones. Or it draws its energy from the more silent ‘right consciousness,’ identified by Ross as the *‘deep mind’*.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>“Interview: Silent Witness,” *Reform Magazine* (June 2015): 16.

<sup>38</sup>Maggie Ross, *Writing the Icon of the Heart: In Silence Beholding* (The Bible Reading Fellowship: Oxford, 2011), 9.

<sup>39</sup>Maggie Ross, *Silence: A User’s Guide*, Volume 1: Process (Cascade Books: Oregon, 2014), 1.

<sup>40</sup>To date there has been no systematic, contemporary, and multidisciplinary work on the meaning and value of silence as a universal, neutral ground of our lives of prayer and morality that I am aware of. There are serious attempts like Jesuit Thomas Dubay’s *Fire Within: St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and the Gospel on Prayer* (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1989), or Shannon Craigo-Snell’s *Silence, Love and Death: Saying “Yes” to God in the Theology of Karl Rahner* (Marquette University Press: Wisconsin, 2008). But Dubay uses an interpretive lens that equates “contemplation” as “experienced presence” according to St. Teresa, or “awareness of divine inflow” for St. John of the Cross—both senses of contemplation falling short from the understanding of silence marked by the absence of any form of objective awareness, especially the awareness of divine presence, or the apophatic in theological term. Snell’s re-



The first potential leads to the abstraction and objectification of what's outside the self while favoring it and its many pursuits such as the drive to compete, the pursuit of the pleasure out of drugs (or social media), the addiction to corruption, or political or religious power and control – some “unwanted sound” and ways of doing violence to one's body or systems in general. The other potential of the ‘linear mind’ is on how it can proceed in the world “linguistically” and self-forgetfully because it is pliant, open, and fed by the silent, multidimensional depth of the ‘deep mind.’ In Biblical imagery, it is the ‘linear mind’ in its willingness and openness to fall on the ground like a seed. For Ross, the ‘linear mind’ cannot directly access the ‘deep mind’ but it can indirectly access it by way of the paradox of

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interpretation of Rahner's thoughts on silence is worth considering even if it is done univocally through the lens of metaphysics and therefore, minus the insights from other disciplines: silence as God's incomprehensible distance, human-divine dialogue in freedom, the horizon of a mystery that can stir dread, a sense of terror, pain or void but at the same time, intimacy.

Within the Roman Catholic tradition, worth reading are Simone Weil's *Waiting for God* (New York: Putnam, 1951); Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2008); and Simon Tugwell, *Ways of Imperfection: An Exploration of Christian Spirituality* (Templegate Publishers: Illinois, 1985). Other writings on silence include Anselm Grün, *The Challenge of Silence* (St. Pauls Publications: Makati, 1987); Peter-Damian Belisle, *The Language of Silence: The Changing Face of Monastic Solitude* (Orbis Books: New York, 2003); and *The Prayer of Love and Silence by a Carthusian* (Cistercian Publication, Inc.: Michigan, 1998) on some fundamental truths about prayer. See also, James A. Connor, *Silent Fire: Bringing the Spirituality of Silence to Everyday Life* (Crown Publishers: New York, 2002). Out in the market are the works of some Benedictine monks like John Main, Lawrence Freeman, Thomas Keating, and Basil Pennington. Though their writings on silence are pastorally available, yet they do not have the potent combinations of multidisciplinary, critical scholarship, contemplative praxis, commonsense practicalities, and universal accessibility.

“attentive receptivity” and self-surrender into silence. This ‘attentive receptivity’ could be facilitated by liminal keys to detachment and self-forgetfulness including among the many possibilities of religious aids like Bible reading, liturgy, praying the Rosary, retreats, helping selflessly and other means available in institutional religions like Christianity or Buddhism. Silence is the *context* because one has to make a choice: either one habitually informs one’s ‘linear mind’ by the more silent ‘deep mind,’ or characteristically proceeds in the world as if nothing exists beyond the linguistic capacity of the ‘linear brain.’ Even silence cannot compel one to choose the silent richness and depth of the ‘deep mind.’ But silence is there for the taking, should we say, waiting at the chapel or in-between Hail Marys, or in the silent raising and breaking of the Host. Silence is an *end* because nothing really matters within or at the end of the day but to dialogically return one’s ‘human speech’ or busyness into the fundamental reference of silence. “Words without silence lead to distortion and irrelevance within institutions.”<sup>41</sup> From a more Christian parlance, the ‘deep mind’ is the field of the silence of transfiguring, kenotic love. It is the field of faithful Self-outpouring of the Divine into creation. God is more silent than humans can imagine, but it is a type of silence that is more self-forgetful or kenotic than humans can think of also. There is not a single millisecond that this divine self-outpouring stops.<sup>42</sup> ‘Human speech’ or ‘linear minds’ informed by this self-outpouring begin to reflect the “peace that surpasses understanding” and where violence has no space.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Maggie Ross, “Jesus in the Balance: Interpretation in the Twenty-First Century,” *Word & World* 29/2 (Spring 2009): 153.

<sup>42</sup>Cf. Romans 8: 38-39 – Paul’s assertion of the absolute and inescapable enclosure of human beings within boundless divine love.

<sup>43</sup>In the 2018 Global Peace Index released by Australia-based

## Conclusion

Contemplative silence and its *praxis* and *theoria* (from a biblical perspective, through the lens of the desert *abbas* and *ammas*, and Maggie Ross with her ‘work of silence,’) serve as a confluence of reconstructive response to restrain personal or systemic violence in human speech. The above exposition on contemplative silence is framed within the general objective of protecting human rights, resolving conflicts, and promoting peace in the process. German philosopher and sociologist Theodor Adorno wrote that “after Auschwitz, there is no poetry.”<sup>44</sup> Perhaps more appropriately, there could be poetry that speaks of inherent human dignity more than the noise of violent human speech: poetic advocacy in which the noise of violent human speech can be named rather than subscribed to and then be subsumed back into silence for its resurrection. Primo Levi is known for this poetic but critical paradox in his scientific and literary works. Through this, Levi as a nonbeliever starkly named shame and guilt for people *merely surviving* amidst the ‘works of death’ of which violence partakes. Overcoming shame and guilt, people of faith likewise can engage in this ‘poetic advocacy’ by being fundamentally and

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Institute for Economics and Peace, the Philippines is ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> among the least peaceful countries in the Asia Pacific region. Cf. <http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/655975/phl-drops-one-rank-in-global-peace-index/story/> accessed 06 Oct. 2018.

<sup>44</sup>The line has been the popular reading of Adorno, from the following original lines: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today,” and then revised as “Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems.” Cf. author and art critic Brian A. Oard at <http://mindfulpleasures.blogspot.com/2011/03/poetry-after-auschwitz-what-adorno.html>

habitually soaked in contemplative silence; an advocacy that is also poetry of peace because its source is the resurrected Peacemaker<sup>45</sup> whose work is often done in silence, by way of humble, kenotic listening.<sup>46</sup> Homes, schools, churches, and other public spaces could become sanctuaries of contemplative silence out of which the “languages” of peacemaking, restraint from violent human speech, or promotion of human dignity emerge, and the chatter of personal and/or system-inflicted violence is continually transfigured.

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<sup>45</sup>John 14:27.

<sup>46</sup>Robert Cardinal Sarah, *The Power of Silence: Against the Dictatorship of Noise* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Publications, 2017), 48.