

Silence, Sound, and the Power of God

By Ephraim Radner

I had a dinner conversation recently with some Quakers. They were older folk, “convicted,” as they called it, who had spent their lives around the world in service of their religious commitments. They wanted to know about how people around the table had come to their faith. We gave our stories. One involved being converted through hearing music in church. Our Quaker friends were fascinated by this. “Yes,” they said, “we’ve heard that can happen.” They tried on the idea a bit — music and conversion — but in the end admitted: “That’s not what happens among Quakers. For Quakers, silence is the source of everything.”

God and music? Or God and silence? Many theologians seem to have come down on the side of silence, for at least two reasons. Both reasons, furthermore, seem confirmed by contemporary cultural realities and assumptions.

The first reason we might tie God’s converting power to silence is a moral one: human silence is required in order to listen to God. As human creatures we are always distracted, caught up in an inextricable net of noise, chatter, and blathering self-regard. To hear God, one must hush one’s inner — and outer — jabbering, born mostly of a kind of narcissism. That is hard to do, of course. There was a time when it was expected, in some churches, that people would be quiet when they arrived for worship; private prayers would be said in silence before the worship began. Frankly, I’ve simply stopped coming to church early on Sundays: it’s nothing but a marketplace of conversation, busyness, and clatter. To that degree, many of our churches mirror the larger world, whose brutal soundscape overwhelms inner quieting with a vengeance.

But, as Martin Buber said, “we cannot talk to God until

nothing more is talking within us.” Do we not remember Elijah waiting for the Lord’s message? Entire volumes — for instance, by Michel Masson — have been written on the way God speaks only after the wind, earthquake, and fire have passed and the still small voice of the Lord emerges from the secret quiet of his divine heart (1 Kgs. 19:12). To be sure, just this has been a Quaker insistence, as in the classic hymn of Whittier’s “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind” (No. 653, Hymnal 1982):

O Sabbath rest by Galilee!
O calm of hills above,
Where Jesus knelt to share with Thee
The silence of eternity
Interpreted by love! ...
Breathe through the heats of our desire
Thy coolness and Thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm.

Whittier’s hymn points as well to the second reason theologians have tended to tie God’s converting power to silence: silence is more expressive of God than is sound. Silence is the origin of all things, in their divine source, for the eternality and depth of God are perfect calm. There are deep Christian intuitions at play here, captured most explicitly in mystical description. So, Meister Eckhart: “The heavenly Father speaks one Word, and speaks it eternally; and in this Word, He expends all His power.”

This notion that God becomes his Word by emptying himself — even, thus, of sound — is suggestive of the nature of divine life. Hence Eckhart continues to have the human heart mirror God’s: “The Word lies hidden in the



Sunset behind Boquillas Canyon Wikimedia Commons / Archbob photo

soul, so that one can neither know or hear it unless one is willing to be pierced by it to one's depths. Otherwise, it can never be heard. Indeed, every voice and every sound must disappear; there must be a quiet calm in place — a silence.”

Eckhart added that the closest thing to God in the universe *is* silence, and the “language of heaven” is, in human terms, silence. Out of the hidden bosom of the Father comes the Word, and thus, as one spiritual writer noted, we might well translate John 1:14 as “Silence became flesh.” This tradition is scripturally rooted: as both Jewish and some Christian (see the Vulgate) translations of Psalm 65:1 put it: “Silence is your praise.”

This mystical orientation has been attractive to contemporary culture in a certain perverse way. Modern cosmology and nihilism have reshaped the notion of “divine silence” into a kind of negative spirituality: we come from silence, we go into silence. Space is silent; all things disappear. There is perhaps a certain awe in the face of this entropic dissipation, but it is hardly worthy of the designation *praise*. The silence of Buddhist recognition is not the same as the mystery of God's audibly unfathomable otherness.

While this contemporary appropriation should alert us to a potential problem with the valorization of divine silence, it cannot overturn the power of the Christian tradition in this respect, epitomized in Carthusian hope for an ecstatic union with God *ab silentio*, “out of the silence.” The 2005 film *Into Great Silence* — almost three hours long — captures the hope wonderfully in its depiction of life within this voiceless Christian religious monastic order; as does, in another genre, the anonymous classic of Carthusian meditation *Amour et Silence (Love and Silence)* from the early 1940s, translated into English as *The Prayer of*

Love and Silence. For Carthusians, not only does silence allow us to be “alert to the presence of God” (contemplation); that is the first point. But thereby, God can come to us in his true being, not as a chatterer. The goal of the monk, after all — and is this not the goal of any Christian conversion, ultimately? — is union rather than dialogue.

There is, however a counter-story to the narrative of God as silence: it is the account of creation as intrinsically noisy in the best sense. This is a claim, perhaps anti-contemplative, made not only by some theologians but also by certain modern philosophers, like Michel Serres. When God creates, he creates a teeming multitude of beings, whose very existence is given, from the hand of their creator, in boisterous, even chaotic noise. This is the meaning of “fruitfulness,” “multiplication,” “filling up,” “swarming” that marks the opening verses of Genesis.

It is hard for us, in our time and place, to appreciate the sheer gloriousness of this created din, reverberating through the universe. My son Isaac took time recently to go to Big Bend National Park in Texas and simply record the soundscape of the area, far from the overwhelming and often crushing racket of urban life. What greets one here is not silence, however, but a different kind of bubbling resonance that seems to emerge directly from the world's simple but miraculous existence. Even space, unwrapped from the atmospheric ripples of humanly apprehended sound, must be noisy to the perceptive, filled with waves of every length and stutter. And is not God hyper-perceptive? Where can God go from noise, since he has made it?

That is the key: the creature, in its very existence, sings to God. As Augustine famously remarks, commenting on the Psalms, every part of creation — the earth, the skies — is

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constantly crying out to God, “You made me!” Certainly the Psalms and Isaiah tell us this: meadows, trees, hills, birds, even the seas, the very heavens and depths of the earth make song to their Lord (cf. Pss. 65:13; 96:12; 98:8; 104:12; 69:34; Isa. 44:23). The very act of creation is one upheld by singing: God says to Job: “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if thou hast understanding. . . . When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” (38:4, 7).

Hence, songs of praise — the music of sound — seem to be a part of created being, so that we must rightly say that music precedes even the creation of human beings. The ancient Greeks had the idea that the planets make a music according to the proportions of their orbits. This was taken up by Christian thinkers like Boethius, and most famously by the 17th-century astronomer and mathematician Johannes Kepler. “The music of the spheres,” he called it; that harmonious sound of the very universe.

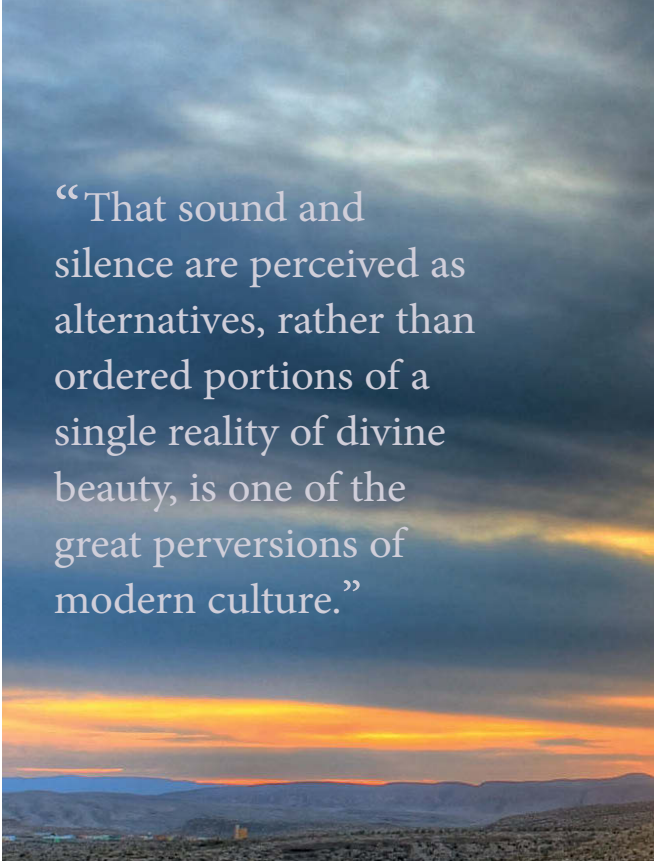
While it might seem absurd that planets could make a sound in empty space, the ultimate idea was that *God* hears this music, for God has created a world that, in its very being, exists in constant praise of its creator. Isaac Newton’s notion of space as a divine “sensorium” catches some of this: God *feels*, he hears the sounds of everything he creates. That is in fact what creation *does* in its internal being: it praises God in song. To be alive, to be a creature, is to make a noisome song for God.

Readers of Richard Hooker remember that, on more than one occasion, he noted that when we pray and sing before God together, we do so in “the presence of celestial powers, that there we stand, we pray, we sound forth hymnes unto God having his Angels intermingled as our associates.” This is not simply a measure of creaturely limitation, however commendable in relation to God. Creatures, material and spiritual, make music to God because, before the angels themselves open their mouths, *God* has opened his own in song: “The LORD thy God in the midst of thee [is] mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing” (Zeph. 3:17).

Of course this is so! For God’s being is a word that creates. In creating, in being creator, God’s being laughs, sings, plays instruments of music, and “rejoices” (Prov. 8:30-31). This is a word whose very being orders that created song according to his own. Hence, in Revelation, there are words that go with the songs of the saints and angels — not only humming, however profound and originating or welling up from some mysterious place far from our ears, but the articulate descriptors of God in Christ: Scriptures *sung*.

Who could fail to be converted to God by such a sound? For it is the sound of God “still working” (John 5:17).

In the end, the question of conversion through silence or through music may come down to the proper ordering of



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each together, our silences and our sounds as a single reality. After all, such an ordering of silence and sound is what music *is*: not simply noise, however createdly joyous, but the holding together of silence — the contours of our mortal createdness before God — and our praise at once, something that is given its perfection in the fleshly path and utterings of Jesus, who sang on the way to the dark silences of the Cross (Mark 14:26). Surely our deepest conversions must follow such a path of woven sound and silence too.

That sound and silence are perceived as alternatives, rather than ordered portions of a single reality of divine beauty, is one of the great perversions of modern culture. Such an ordering is something one must *learn*, ascetically, as it were, and corporately with others. It is learned as individuals are shaped by the traditional silence of church, out of which a calibrated and ordered singing together, tied to the words of Scripture and their internal human appropriations (hymnody), is enfolded into the prayer of the humble listener. Our disintegrative and busied culture, by contrast, has made us *unlearn* common singing, leaving only human noise in its place; and we, in turn, have transformed the uttered Word into pallid and self-satisfied mummings, unstructured by the silences of its divine scaffolding.

I was converted in part by the hymn “Come down, O Love divine” — a poem originally written by the medieval wandering ascetic Bianco da Siena, who, with famous Franciscan minstrels like Jacopone da Todi, let go of the world’s noise for the sake of God’s, and sang it into the empty spaces of hungry hearts.

The Rev. Ephraim Radner is professor of historical theology at Wycliffe College, University of Toronto.