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Silence: A Christian History

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James G. R. Cronin

Silence speaks as a visual conceit through the serene icon of Mary Magdalene, chosen to illustrate the dust jacket enfolding *Silence: A Christian History*, foreshadowing themes in Diarmaid MacCulloch's magisterial study. This cover details a scene of dedication, from a 14th-century fresco cycle, in the Lower Church of the Basilica of San Francesco Assisi, painted by the workshop of Giotto Di Bondone, showing the Magdalene taking the hand of the basilica's kneeling founder, Teobaldo Pontano, bishop of Assisi. In this specific context, the iconography of Mary Magdalene can be read as signifying obedience to the institutional Church of Rome.⁽¹⁾ More broadly, because the Magdalene was so elusively identified in Scripture she was gradually employed as an enduring devotional object onto which a succession of normative values could be projected. In the Latin West, her image was reinvented from a prostitute, to a mystic sibyl, to a feminist role model. Mary Magdalene illustrates how tradition becomes authoritative; how revolutions are co-opted by institutional elites; how sexual desire becomes domesticated; how pious devotion can serve clandestine domination, and how, ultimately, forgotten pasts become improperly remembered.

Over the past decade the phenomenon of silence has become a fertile subject of analysis frequently transcending disciplinary boundaries. Sara Maitland, in her review of *Silence: A Christian History*,

attempted to classify this unclassifiable study as 'a specialist book for non-specialist readers'.⁽²⁾ In the realm of studies on silence, Maitland is a fellow traveler. Her own study, *A Book of Silence*, has charted a cultural history of this phenomenon, but places a greater emphasis on solitude than MacCulloch proposes here.⁽³⁾ Maitland praises MacCulloch's study as 'highly accessible to anyone seriously interested by excellent and lively writing rather than by any dumbing down'.⁽⁴⁾ Maitland's praise is representative of a consensus of reviews on this publication by Diarmaid MacCulloch, Professor of the History of the Church at Oxford, a biographer of Thomas Cranmer, and author of an acclaimed history of the Reformation. Readers acquainted with MacCulloch's opinion pieces in *The Guardian* and *The Observer* newspapers will be familiar with this historian's approach to the past as being in dialogue with the present. The past is too frequently misremembered in MacCulloch's opinion. The historian's duty, as time's watchdog, is to 'dig down' to excavate cultural patterns, 'to reconstruct the crystalline structures in the actions and the pronouncements of people and to explain their meaning, so far as fragile and pattern-making human beings are capable of doing so' (p. 2). As a project *Silence: A Christian History* arose from his series of Gifford Lectures on Natural Theology (<http://www.giffordlectures.org> [2]), hosted by the University of Edinburgh in 2012, but his interest in and knowledge on sacred silence also came out in his award-winning magnum opus, *A History of Christianity*.⁽⁵⁾

Originating as a series of public lectures on historical understandings of God, *Silence: A Christian History* explores spaces in between the academic disciplines of history, theology and philosophy by peeling back layers to uncover Christianity's historical formations. The work is structured as four movements, or meditations, on alternative histories of silence in Western culture. The apophatic tradition, through contemplative prayer, is a clearly defined thread running through this study. There is, however, another thread worth considering, namely, a multiplicity of responses to cultural trauma. Christianity's historicity was conditioned by responses to specific national and personal trauma moments. Both threads will be considered as running simultaneously through the narrative under review.

Diarmaid MacCulloch opens his study with a sweeping excursus on Christianity's Biblical prehistory as mediated through the texts of the Jewish Old Testament (Tanakh). The choice of the word 'Tanakh' (p. 8), to classify the Old Testament, is a device obscuring the familiar so as to make it deliberately strange. The Tanakh's oscillations between God's favour, through speech, and displeasure, through silence, underscored the covenantal relationship between the chosen people of Israel and their God.

In reading the opening section, this reviewer was reminded of the dialectical struggles postmodernist writers have identified as marking new discursive formations. For example, Roland Barthes, in his analysis of Jacob's struggle with the angel, as told in *Genesis* 32, has commented: 'By marking Jacob (Israel) God (or the Narrative) permits an anagogical development of meaning, creates the formal operational conditions of a new 'language', the election of Israel being its 'message'. God is a logothete, a founder of a language, and Jacob is here a 'morpheme' of the new language'.⁽⁶⁾

While the tone of New Testament silence resonates with echoes from the Tanakh, it nevertheless, significantly departs from its Jewish heritage in order to construct its own Christian identity. Religious communities are primarily living faith communities. Luke's Gospel opens with a usurpation of Jewish Temple worship as signified by Zachariah the priest of the Old Covenant. Zachariah's temporary 'dumbness' followed by his 'praise and prophecy' at John the Baptist's birth signifies a transition from the old to the new dispensation (p. 32). Yet, it is to Luke that Christians owe three great Tanakh-derived prayers 'the *Magnificat*, the *Benedictus* and the *Nunc dimittis*' which have for centuries comprised part of the daily liturgical rituals of the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican communions.⁽⁷⁾ Mark's Gospel secrecy reaches into the heart of the mystery of the incarnate *logos*, what MacCulloch calls, 'that greatest Christian silence of all, the Resurrection' (p. 40). Clearly, New Testament writers understood that there was no need to articulate the Resurrection, as they would have perceived believers to be experiencing its affects through the agency of the Spirit within their communities of faith. The centrality of this 'blank' at Christianity's centre is best understood as marking a cultural delineation between Christian 'insiders' and non-Christian 'outsiders' in the wider context of Hellenistic and early Imperial Mediterranean culture. In addition to the primary silence of the Resurrection there is the silence of Apostolic Tradition, which while

remaining unwritten, yet uniquely marks ways in which religious dominations, throughout history, were prompted to receive the annunciation of sacred words and actions through the particularity of cultural performances. MacCulloch acknowledges the cultural interplay, between speaking and silencing, as operating in dialectical tension. It is precisely this tension which defines meaning. Ignatius of Antioch tells the Christians of Magnesia: 'It is not the content of the Revelation but the light that reveals it; it is not the word but the living breath which makes the words heard at the same time as the silence from which it came?.'

[\(8\)](#)

The books of the Tanakh reveal, for the historian, a process of creative responses to disappointment when prophecy is refocused and national responses to God's purposes are reconsidered. The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem during the first century was a national trauma that redefined Judaism. In early Christianity, the closing of the scriptural canon, excluding much of the apocalyptic literature that had formed the 'matrix of Judaism in the time of Jesus and his first followers' (p. 54), can be read as a faith community's defensive self-preservation.

The period of the Church Fathers, between the second and fifth centuries, epitomised Christianity's stabilisation of scripture and tradition. The second section of the book focuses on the formation of the Christian monastic movement across Egypt, Turkey and Syria as set against a backdrop of this textual stabilization. Any reconstruction of this story requires facing a silence of loss through historical lacunae. Diarmaid MacCulloch estimates that 'around 85 per cent of the texts which we positively know to have once existed in the first 150 years of Christianity's life are now lost' (p. 42). Beginning in the second century, the formation of a canon was fixed against the suppression of texts condemned as heretical by the Catholic Church. Gnosticism became the first heresy with which early Christianity had to contend, and from which it had to differentiate itself. The intensity of struggles between gnostics and Catholic Christians arose from homogeneities, which threatened to absorb, rather than any heterogeneity, which might have defined them as contradictory belief systems. In these struggles, 'the opposing themes of silence and noise were the subject of a major tug of war. In favour of silence for Catholics was a twofold consideration: first silence played a significant part in Jesus's own thinking about himself. Equally important was the fact that it had become a more prominent theme in Greco-Roman philosophy and culture, without any prompting from Christians' (p. 57). MacCulloch interprets mainstream Christianity's rejection of laughter as resulting from laughter's too close association with gnosticism (p. 61).

In early Christianity, the rewriting of history was associated with deliberate acts of forgetting and alternative remembering as ascetics and monks re-wrote their histories in order to associate their foundations with the cult of the martyrs, or heroic witnesses, for the Christian faith. In the late fourth century, the 'Cappadocian Fathers' (Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa) 'stabilized imperial Christianity around an extended version of the Nicene Creed and framed much of their debates in terms of negative theology' (p. 79). Here, 'negative theology' denotes the 'apophatic approach to divinity which portrays what God is not, rather than what he is' (p. 234). It is precisely within 'negative theology' that Diarmaid MacCulloch locates the positive power of silence, through contemplative traditions, running under the noise of the 16th-century Reformation movements in part three of this study.

The histories of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation can be read as traumatic responses to the rupturing of Christendom. Diarmaid MacCulloch argues that just as Christianity's historical consciousness responded to its Jewish heritage, similarly the consciousness of Reformation Europe was a response to medieval reformation prototypes. The Protestant Reformation can be read against the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy of the eighth and ninth centuries, but chiefly these 16th-century reformers relied on the invisible God of the Old Testament. It is hardly surprising that reformers employed the words of the Psalmist condemning 'dumb idols' (Psalms 31 and 115) as justifications for their iconoclastic attacks on Roman Catholic iconography. The 'negative theology' of contemplation was not completely effaced with the dissolution of the monasteries. It was partially reclaimed through radical Protestantism as exemplified by Quaker and Anabaptist communities. During the 16th century, two Spanish Carmelite mystics, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, came to signify the tradition of 'negative theology' within Counter-Reformation Tridentine Catholicism.

Sara Maitland argues that Diarmaid MacCulloch's study is comprised of two separate books and this second book is telescoped into part four.⁽⁹⁾ The narrative in this final part certainly takes a dark turn, as the author exposes the deliberate masking of corrupt power structures by rupturing dysfunctional narratives of institutional abuse, anti-Semitism and slavery, and probing religion's Nicodemism, or dissimulation to ensure a survival of minorities within the stream of cultural dominance, including Iberian crypto-Judaism, crypto-Christians from Asia Minor during the Middle Ages, and an Anglo-Catholic gay subculture within the Church of England during the 19th century. Rather than two books, it may be argued that MacCulloch deliberately orchestrated this final movement as a closing meditation on the imperative of historians to speak to power and to continuously work towards full disclosure: 'selective memory will always invite further probing, to find the silences which still demand an ending' (p. 216). This closing section, bristling with embryonic ideas, is far too rushed. The easy target of Pope Pius XII's 'silence' of omission in failing to condemn the Holocaust deserves more nuanced treatment. The reason for this pontiff's failure to condemn the Nazi regime forthrightly has been debated for half a century. His consciousness was conditioned by a defensive need to preserve the legal and the spiritual institutional identity of the Roman Catholic Church that had by the 1930s lost the greatest part of its temporal power. Was the pontiff indifferent to the fate of the victims of Nazi genocide? Or was he afraid that more people would suffer if he spoke out? Many of the key papers relating to his controversial pontificate still remain under embargo. Any ultimate assessment of this pontiff's responsibilities will need to confront the silence of a still-restricted record. Studies of Pope Pius XII tend mainly to focus on his conduct as pontiff during the war years, but Thomas Merton (too briefly mentioned throughout this study) valued Pius XII's condemnation of nuclear military proliferation in the decade after the Second World War.

Diarmaid MacCulloch chooses Thomas Merton, the 'unquiet' Trappist (p. 272), as paradigmatic of the last century's 'democratization of spiritual exploration, centred for so long in the West on the clerical Orders and the regular life' (p. 229). Merton, regarded as one of the most important American Roman Catholic writers of the 20th century, combined the rigor of New York intellectuals with the probity of the Desert Fathers. It is precisely Merton's popularization of 'negative theology' from Evagrius, as mediated through John Cassian, to popular Catholic mystics like John of the Cross, which could have been more fully integrated by the author in order to underscore the apophatic heart of his study.⁽¹⁰⁾ In 1966, at the height of the Vietnam War, Merton engaged in ecumenical dialogue by welcoming Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese monk, poet, and peacemaker, to speak at his abbey in Kentucky.⁽¹¹⁾ While Merton's writings from the mid 1960s reveal ecumenical dialogue with Buddhism, Taoism and Sufism, he nevertheless undertook these dialogues from the vantage point of being firmly rooted within his own Christian tradition. In this respect, his approach to ecumenical dialogue resembled that of Jesuit theologian Fr. William Johnston S. J. in post-war Japan. Thomas Merton, a convert, who had been led to Roman Catholicism through the intellect, was far from being 'anti-Modernist' (p. 230). If anything, his translation of the wisdom of contemplatives to late 20-century secular culture, which he classified as the 'post-Christian era' ⁽¹²⁾ approximates an experiment in post-Modernist theology seeking new understandings of the divine at the limits of language.⁽¹³⁾

Since the 1970s lay or new monasticism, partially inspired by Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who imagined Christianity's renewal as a re-appropriation of the Gospel's social ethic, has been growing steadily particularly in the United States of America. Any exploration of such contemporary responses to this contemplative tradition is worthy of another book. In a post 9/11 world, where religion still matters, Diarmaid MacCulloch's magisterial study is a welcome introduction to Christianity's counter-narratives by sketching the possibilities such alternatives offer for the regeneration of faith communities.

Notes

1. Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages*. (Princeton, NJ, 2000), p. 86.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Sara Maitland, 'Silence: A Christian History?', by Diarmaid MacCulloch ? review?, *The Spectator* <<http://www.spectator.co.uk/books/8883821/learning-to-listen-2/> [3]> [accessed 10 July 2013].[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Sara Maitland, *A Book of Silence*. (London, 2008).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Maitland, 'Silence: A Christian History?', by Diarmaid MacCulloch ? review?.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*. (London, 2009).
[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Roland Barthes, 'The struggle with the angel: textual analysis of Genesis 32: 22-32?', in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. Stephen Heath (London, 1977), p. 135.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Lucy Beckett, 'The words of God?', *The Times Literary Supplement* <<http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1236152.ece> [4]> [accessed 16 April 2013].[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Mark Patrick Hederman, *Anchoring the Altar: Christianity and the Work of Art* (Dublin, 2002), p. 20; Mark Patrick Hederman, 'Understanding silent history of Christianity.' *Irish Examiner* <<http://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/artsfilmtv/books/understanding-silent-history-of-christianity-228303.html> [5] > [accessed 16 April 2013][Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Maitland, 'Silence: A Christian History?', by Diarmaid MacCulloch ? review?.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Thomas Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Louisville, KY, 2005).[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. David Givney, *The Social Thought of Thomas Merton: The Way of Nonviolence and Peace for the Future*. (Winona, MN, 2009).[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton*. (Louisville, KY, 2011).[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. Thomas Merton, 'The root of war is fear?', in *Passion for Peace: Reflections on War and Nonviolence*, edited by William H. Shannon (New York, NY, 1995), p. 24.[Back to \(13\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review, particularly its engaging meditation on the book's cover image of Mary Magdalene, and does not wish to comment further.

Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/mar/29/silence-christian-history-macculloch-review> [6]

Tablet

<http://www.thetablet.co.uk/issue/1000358/booksandart> [7]

Economist

<http://www.economist.com/news/books-and-arts/21574469-meditation-silence-dawn-christianity-quietude>

[8]

Times Literary Supplement

<http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1236152.ece> [4]

Age

<http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/books/silence-a-christian-history-20130628-2p2ni.html> [9]

Irish Times

<http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/silence-a-christian-history-by-diarmaid-macculloch-1.1371428> [10]

Times Higher Education

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/books/silence-a-christian-history-by-diarmaid-macculloch/2002880.article> [11]

Sunday Times

http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/culture/books/non_fiction/article1236092.ece [12]

Telegraph

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[2] <http://www.giffordlectures.org/>

[3] <http://www.spectator.co.uk/books/8883821/learning-to-listen-2/>

[4] <http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1236152.ece>

[5] <http://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/artsfilmtv/books/understanding-silent-history-of-christianity-228303.html>

[6] <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/mar/29/silence-christian-history-macculloch-review>

[7] <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/issue/1000358/booksandart>

[8] <http://www.economist.com/news/books-and-arts/21574469-meditation-silence-dawn-christianity-quietude>

[9] <http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/books/silence-a-christian-history-20130628-2p2ni.html>

[10] <http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/silence-a-christian-history-by-diarmaid-macculloch-1.1371428>

[11] <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/books/silence-a-christian-history-by-diarmaid-macculloch/2002880.article>

[12] http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/culture/books/non_fiction/article1236092.ece

[13] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/9971514/Two-books-about-noise-and-silence-review.html>