

Divine Silence – Between Fascination and Deification

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ABSTRACT: Seen by most of us as an absence, a nothingness, silence reveals its fascination through its power of meaning. Subordinate to the field of communication, silence is not an epiphenomenon of speech, but complementary to it. Finding its limits between ambiguity and paradox, silence proves to have a greater potential for meaning than speech. Deciphering silence requires the initiation of the human subject. Theological silence, whether human or divine, creates the framework for knowing God. Silent concealment of God provides the framework for human ennoblement with God's character. Enlightenment, rational knowledge, even wonder, are preliminary stages of ennoblement. The completion of this process is through the direct assistance of the Spirit of God. Following the model of the logos becoming a living word, this study aims to outline a rhema of divine silence by reference to narrative cores from the Bible or by penetrating the mysticism of the Eastern Church.

KEYWORDS: silence, logos, ambiguous, paradoxical, deification, mystical

1. Silence - a philosophical category

Philosophy values the meanings and functions of silence. It is a virtue, a way of knowing the truth, a key to philosophical truth. Plotinus, the Neoplatonist (Rotaru 2005 a, 275-283) whose work provides, in the opinion of some, the resources of Christianity (Rotaru 2005 b, 295-324), identifies silence as a divine principle in nature, i.e., nature produces signified structures without

having signifying means of expression. Nature conveys an intrinsic message by means other than verbal.

2. Silence - epiphenomenon of utterance

The experience most often associated with silence is absence. Following the model of darkness perceived as the absence of light, most of us perceive silence as an outline without content. Beyond this perspective, silence is full of content. Compared to utterance, silence is not just an epiphenomenon of it. The subordination of silence is not to utterance but to communication. From the point of view of communication, silence is a well-defined category, with all the elements needed to convey and understand a message. Not infrequently, silence proves to be much richer in meaningful material than speech. Silence has a sender and a receiver, a transmission channel and a code, a purpose and a message that can be interpreted. The reasons why most people refuse to value the message of silence are either convenience or the much greater accessibility of speech. The perception of silence as an absence, „the place where all sound is absent” is a subjective experience. Just as the word, beyond the string of sounds, receives unspecified meanings, depending on the communication skills of the subjects, so silence is a spectral notion that translates into distinct sequences within the range between non-experience and the absolute. From this perspective, silence follows the same meaning as the utterance of the word, which finds its signified at a level lower or at most equal to the human subject's ability to handle meaning. There is a differentiation in the sense that silence is more polarised in the segment that gravitates in the zone of non-experience, whereas the word reserves this zone for exceptions, but crowds into the zone of everyday experience (elegant use for the mediocre).

Put again alongside utterance, we can see that the two categories of communication are not opposable. It is wrong to regard silence as antithetical to utterance. When subjected to a semantic analysis, the two are differentiated only by the ‚presence/absence of sound’ sign. Beyond that, each of the two categories has meaning, multiple interpretative valences, different layers of interpretation: morphological, syntactic and semantic. The author deals with the topic of silence, identifying three of the four layers of semantic interpretation (the phonological layer is missing): morphological, syntactic and

semantic. (Neher 2002, 17-86). Silence is therefore a well-defined category of communication that is neither opposable to speech nor subordinate to it.

3. The paradox of silence

The term, although it gives silence a value of meaning, does so in part. Ambiguity includes in itself the possibility of interpretation and thus takes it out of the sphere of non-experience of communication, but the vector is predominantly negative, because it induces an abusive limitation of interpretation. Ambiguity expresses a lack of consistency, something lacking in the term, a limiting element that blazes. It inspires vagueness in meaning. From a psychological point of view, ambiguity induces an amputation of enthusiasm, a helplessness imposed independently of the structure of the human subject. When something is ambiguous, you resign yourself to a pre-existing limitation that it is not in the human spirit to remove or overcome.

The proposed concept for association with silence is “paradox”. It opens up the field of interpretation of the meanings of silence, but does so in a more generous way. Paradox admits dismay at an idea that has been outlined, but the attitude is more inclined towards active involvement. The unelucidated element in the paradox intrigues but also mobilizes the mind to scrutinize. Paradox leaves much more generous room for searching, for deciphering mysteries. Delving into the mystery, even if it does not definitively delimit the content of the concept, does not create a ceiling, as in the case of ambiguity. Each deepening into the meaning of silence, even if it uncovers new and new heights of the unknown, does not disarm but, on the contrary, motivates further penetration with the mind. The Romanian philosopher identifies mystery as the object of true knowledge. Deep knowledge, which goes beyond the level of measurable observation, detaches itself from the object of knowledge, without leaving it. Split in two, the mystery has a part that shows itself through its signs and a part that hides behind them (cryptic). The cryptic element encourages deeper knowledge (Blaga 2013, 13-22). The paradox of silence implies an emergence of internalization of the subject.

Silence is not the absence of sound, because utterance follows silence, not the other way around. Before utterance, space is possessed by silence, so that, when utterance ceases, silence again frames utterance as a limit. Referring to the biblical silence, which precedes creation, we can characterize

the silence-spoken relationship as an infinite space, dominated by silence, in which utterance intervenes sequentially and in a limited way. „On its surface, silence appears as absence, emptiness and emptiness (...) But deep down, in the last instance, the silence of solitude is precisely the force of being that concentrates and sustains existence” (Remete 2004, 27).

Seen as „silence” (the absence of sound), silence becomes an exclusive area, reserved for those trained to „hear” the voice of silence. Cosmic silence is not the state of affairs of existence, because it communicates, in competition with speech, a treasure trove of ideas. The perception of silence as mute only denotes a subjective limitation of the human side. Cosmic silence has to communicate, but it does not have, to say’ to everyone. The silence of existence is rather a deafness of the uninitiated. To decipher it, a revelatory approach is needed. „*You called me and called me and put an end to my deafness!*” (Augustin 2003, 228) Augustine exclaims at the moment of divine revelation. Muteness is seen to be elective. Elective (or selective) mutism refers to the inability of some people (especially children or emotionally immature people) to express themselves verbally only in certain situations (Psychology Today 2023). He is active towards all those, „whose judgement has not been trained by experience to discern”, this being a paraphrase of Hebrews 5:13-14, the interpretation of silence is done through a revealing act.

4. Theological silence

Silence, whether attributed to the deity or to a human subject, occupies an important place in most of the world’s religious spaces.

Silence is an often-used literary, philosophical and theological category. Eastern mysticism, Sufism (an Islamic religious movement, representing Muslim mysticism), Christian mysticism alike, appeal to silence as a virtue. In the Christian sphere, we mention the writings of Saint John of the Cross (Jean de la Croix), or Maitre Eckart. Philosophy, for its part, also calls for silence as a virtue, as an instrument of wisdom or of knowing the truth. (Caraman 2020,181)

In the Christian world, the theological value of silence is appreciated, especially in the Eastern world. The Orthodox Church, through its apophatic theology of denial, values silence, especially as a way for man to know God.

The union of man and God is achieved in the silence of both parties. Silence ensures the discovery of the divine mystery (Evdokimov 1992, 43-65).

Negative theology preaches silence as a means of knowing God. Sometimes the boundary between human silence and God's silence is not clearly demarcated. At other times it propagates the idea of the impossibility of knowing God, the Unknowable, in the finitude of our mind. Moreover, the idea of associating with God attributes that can be shared by the human being is unacceptable to negative theologians. Knowing the unnamable is done through silence. This time it is the silence of the man who is unable, illegitimate to name what is unnamed.

The missing link in this otherwise mind-challenging approach is the spirit of man who benefits from God's enlightenment to know Him.

The transcendent-immanent antinomy is not a logical contradiction, but a dialectical structure. The morphology of the dialectic in question is a philosophical one (along the lines of Kant, the father of immanentism (Bulgakov 1999, 140-148), which places the knowledge of the unknowable, 'Ding an sich' as an object of thought not suited to it, which requires a higher, divine reason), and of a theological nature: the knowledge of God's thought through the intercession of God's Spirit. Without the contribution of this facilitation, knowledge of God would indeed not be possible. Theology is superior to reason, since the latter is conditioned by the limits imposed by its object. Theology, on the other hand, rests on the unity of the transcendent and the immanent. The two complement each other, and the result of knowledge is potentially unlimited: „But God has revealed them to us through his Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.” (Corinthians 2:10), a limit imposed, however, by the finiteness of the human mind, on the one hand, and by the measure of enlightenment assigned to it from above.

5. Theological silence - union with Him, deification

Silence is more than a way of knowing. The enlightenment produced by deciphering the meanings of silence is, to some extent, an encounter with the divine. But this perspective is limiting. Attempting to decipher meanings is only a glimpse from the doorway. It is an understanding at the borderline between the 'outsiders' and the 'insiders'. To tread fully on the ground of silence, to assimilate as fully as possible its springs, is to be deified. Just as the

unseeing of things is the condition of faith (Hebrews 11:1 - „things not seen”) or of happiness itself (John 20:29 - „Blessed are those who have believed and have not seen”), so the unseen encapsulates an abundance of the beauty of His Being, beauty waiting to be revealed. Silence gives way to knowing God in a deeper way than limiting the expression of words. They serve as instruments, until a moment of interiorization of divine truths that can no longer be sustained by the spoken word. The transformation of silence into a rhema of its own is done by conquering the kingdom from within („The kingdom of God is within you” - Luke 17:21).

The search for the kingdom within one’s own being must be wary of the Eastern vision of knowing the absolute. This vision, which has to some extent also affected the Christian area, idolizes the human being and mandates it as having the resources necessary to overcome the human condition. The human interior, in itself, is not the repository of divine values. At most, it can be a place for the manifestation of values that are superior to human nature and that are of divine origin. The Spirit of God penetrates the human being through faith and acts in conjunction with human nature, a divine nature. The divine-human distinction remains valid: „The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God.” (Romans 8:16) The result of the coalescence is deification.

Vladimir Lossky (1994, 35-38), by analyzing aspects of Eastern spirituality as they emerge from Orthodox dogmas, places theology in the sphere of mysticism. The term used in the title of his work (mystic) is associated with mystery. The use of this term is quite confusing in general and requires caution in its use. It is present in both sacred and profane language. Outside the sacred, „mystical’ refers to the obscure, the irrational, the dark. Under the magnifying glass of psycho-somatic interpretation, the term takes on bizarre, pathological meanings. This mysticism claims access to superhuman forces, but it appeals to manipulative powers. „Atheistic mysticism” (Lossky 1994, 13) is geared towards experiences beyond the ordinary, but it greatly distorts the importance of the human factor. Secular mysticism praises man and the resources identified in himself, whereas the path of deification praises divinity for the grace to descend into the human being.

6. The burden of divine silence

The acquisition of the divine nature is preceded by a process accompanied by suffering. Paul, writing to the Romans, associates the benefit of the divine infilling with the acquisition of the inheritance with Christ. Inheritance is conditional on the acceptance of suffering: „And if we are children, we are also heirs: heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ, if we truly suffer with him, that we may also be glorified with him” (8:17). This cohabitation with suffering takes place in an environment of divine silence. The union is intimate and mystical. It cannot be translated into words, for words prove powerless.

The nature of sanctifying suffering is not an everyday suffering that every human being experiences. It is suffering „with Him”. The typology of divine silence brings this pattern to light: in moments of transformation according to His Image, the human subject remains alone, God ceases to gloss over the previously accumulated logos. The slova about love becomes alive, the slova about the imperative of forgiveness becomes applicable, the slova about the unimaginable unfolding of God’s power becomes reality in the conditions of God’s silence. It envelops itself in silence, for sequences of a necessary length, so that man’s inner transformation validates the slova.

7. The divine silence that ennobles

7.1. *The deification of Abraham*

When we speak of deification, we refer to the acquisition of the transferable attributes of God, such as divine love, full forgiveness, full knowledge, etc. Deification is not a Luciferic attack on the glory, power and uniqueness of God, but is within the limits of a recovery of the fallen human condition.

Throughout Scripture there are narrative nuclei in which God’s silence works the acquisition of godliness. Neher identifies a morphology of divine silence. Depending on the duration of the silence and the details of the interruption of the silence sequence, Neher speaks of „webs” and „knots” of silence. The webs stretch over long, tiring but clearly delineated intervals, while the knots are insertions of divine silence hidden among morpho-syntactic, or semantically related details (Neher 2002, 17-26).

Abraham, after his many wonderful experiences with God, is put to a test that is meant to validate all his knowledge of God. The episode

of Isaac's sacrifice is a transformation of the stored logos (Abraham had a remarkable verbal communication with God) into rhema. Surprisingly, the conversion of which we have spoken will take place under the auspices of divine silence. The biblical text does not delimit the narrative sequence in time, but research shows a three-day journey from the moment Abraham and Isaac were separated from their companions at the foot of the mountain to the raising of the hand to perform the sacrifice. These are three agonizing days in which Abraham, who is accustomed to being spoken to by God, is plunged into deep silence by Yahweh. More than ever Abraham longs for God to gossip. He needed every detail he could hang on to: an encouragement, another promise, a detail about reconfiguring the divine plan for which he had received such valid promises. None of it! Abraham is forced to tread in the realm of oppressive silence, accompanied only by what he had previously accumulated from his experiences with God.

Abraham successfully overcomes the moment because of what he knew about God: „He thought that God could raise even from the dead; and, indeed, as risen from the dead he received him.” (Hebrews 11:19). He is not instilled with unshakable conviction. That „he thought that” rather implies a consideration of whether God would do so. He had neither experienced nor knew of any such precedent of God raising someone from the dead. Up to this point Abraham's faith had followed a linear course. Even though the intensity of the challenges increased as they came, he was constantly accompanied by the validity of what God had said. Everything that God had told him had been fulfilled to the letter, even if it required superhuman interventions (Lot's crucifixion, the birth of Isaac). The challenge he now faces contradicts what he knew about God. Not only could he not demand the same abominable kind of worship as the neighboring peoples (the sacrifice of children), but, moreover, he is likely to destroy the validity of what he had previously said: „In Isaac you will have a seed that will bear your name.” (Hebrews 11:18).

The silence of God destroys the linearity we are accustomed to by utterance. The internal logic of silence is different from that of utterance. The human subject learns, through God's silence, an internal logic inaccessible under ordinary conditions. The cause-effect duality is overcome for a new algorithm:

(The mystery) makes man angry and feel the fragility of his condition. It is the silent and humble vibration of the creature that remains forbidden in the face of what is an ineffable mystery, beyond the possibilities of any creature (Otto 1992, 21)

7.2. In what way is Abraham deified?

First, one can see the sovereignty of God, who has the freedom to reconfigure the plan. In fact, the one who needs to be reconfigured is Abraham. He goes through an initiatory journey in which he is exposed to God's perfect wisdom. Man's linear thinking is fractured for an ennoblement with divine overtones.

Second, the sequence of Isaac's sacrifice is anticipatory of Christ's sacrifice. Only Abraham can now understand the sacrificial heart of a father who gives his most precious gift. Moreover, Abraham now mirrors the very beauty of God. God's gaze delights in Abraham, because it sees the closest model of Himself. In the episode of Isaac's sacrifice, God's silence achieves its purpose: Abraham is ennobled, capable of the same willingness to give as God.

The association with the Sacrifice of Christ is not accidental and cannot be ignored. We see the same pattern applied to divine silence in both instances. Both the sacrifice of Isaac and the sacrifice of Christ are preceded by this compelling sequence of divine silence. Without being an absence, the silence manifests itself in the form of a programmed, behind-the-scenes retreat of God. The validation of the divine plan is done in silence. Divine silence finds its role as a catalyst for divine logos.

Conclusions

The beauty and depth of silence can be explored without limit. In a philosophical context the concept inspires ever deeper exploration. The feeling that is released is one of wonder, dismay, thirst for knowledge. In this space, silence fails to go beyond aesthetic delight.

The field of theology gives silence a much deeper meaning. Whether associated with divinity or the human factor, silence itself potentiates deification. Silence in itself is not a sufficient condition for ennobling with the character of God, any more than human suffering alone converts into something divine. Divine silence is constructive insofar as it is part of God's plan. Man is both object and subject. He is an object because silence acts from

outside himself, producing a spiritual crisis which leads to deification. Subject, because he is a partner with God in this process. Even if he is secondary in the process of transformation, man is equally a beneficiary of this process, alongside God. Man receives from the beauty of God's character, and God takes glory from his own work.

Divine silence is not always constructive. It can come as a curse, as a result of a marked disobedience to divine law (Rotaru 2015, 318-322). In this situation the pressure of silence produces alienation, anguish, dehumanization. Subordinate to the category of communication, divine silence is the bearer of a message at least as profound as utterance. Beyond the message it carries in itself, silence achieves a validation of human experiences with God or converts the spoken word into living matter. Divine silence is life-giving by transforming the human subject into a doer of the Word.

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