KEEPING GOD'S SILENCE

Towards a Theological Ethics of Communication

Rachel Muers

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Challenges in Contemporary Theology

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To Jane and Robin
Who heard me first

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book began as a PhD project. It was convenient to have a one-word answer to the standard question “So, what is your thesis about?” – “Silence!” – and also very convenient to be able to predict the jokes – “So, what are you going to do in your viva?” or occasionally “So, are you going to leave the last few pages blank?”

Many would think, possibly with good reason, that trying to write 80,000 words about silence was an even stranger way to spend three years of one’s life than are most pieces of research. Be that as it may, I have been fortunate enough to find a large number of people, during the initial period of research and since, who have been prepared to help bring the project to fruition. In acknowledging my enormous debts to them, I of course retain full responsibility for the defects of the final product.

The PhD was written under the supervision of David Ford, whose enthusiasm for the original idea has been followed by enormously generous help, guidance, and encouragement. Janet Martin Soskice acted as my supervisor at two important stages of the research, and has been another most valuable source of support throughout. Al McFadyen and Catherine Pickstock, the examiners of the thesis, offered important advice for its subsequent development, as did Dan Hardy.

During the genesis of the book I have been part of three academic institutions: Clare College, Cambridge, which provided practical and financial help during my PhD work; Girton College, Cambridge, where as a junior research fellow I was welcomed into a supportive and stimulating interdisciplinary work environment; and most recently the Department of Theology at the University of Exeter. I am grateful to all the members of these institutions who have helped to create the conditions within which this book could grow. My doctoral research was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Board, formerly the British Academy.

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My husband and beloved Ffriend Gavin Burnell is a true exemplar of patience, listening, and other virtues discussed in this book. I prefer not to ask him whether it takes more patience to cope with me or with my frequently recalcitrant computer. In any case, my gratitude to him is incalculable, and ever greater.

SOURCES

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ABBREVIATIONS

New critical edition of Bonhoeffer's works

DBW	*Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, ed. Eberhard Bethge et al., 16 vols. (Gutersloh: Kaiser, 1986–).
DBWE	*Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., 16 vols. (in progress) (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995–)

Other editions of Bonhoeffer's works

GS	*Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (Munich: Kaiser, 1965–)

INTRODUCTION: BEGINNING WITH SILENCE

> When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for the space of half an hour. (Revelation 8:1[1])

The book of Revelation is full of sounds – crying voices, thunder, trumpets, harp-playing, singing – and of speech – proclamations, prayers, commands, prophecies. Carried along by the tumult of sounds and voices, the reader of Revelation is brought up short by the silence at the beginning of chapter 8. We are invited to pause and wonder, not only what will happen next, but what this silence means. Why is there "silence in heaven" just at this point, and for just this length of time? Who is keeping silent, and for what end? What wider meaning of silence is brought into play here – wonder or terror, meaninglessness or fullness of meaning, suspense or completeness? Having begun to ask these questions, the reader might ponder them indefinitely, because the unexplained silence opens up so many possibilities for interpretation. At the same time, since all that the text does is to state that the silent pause occurs, it is very easy for the reader to pass over it quickly to the next set of events and the next sound effect. What more can be said, she might ask, once one has said "there was silence?" By definition, there is nothing going on here that can be talked about; there is no action, no event, no Revelation, merely their absence.

A few commentaries on Revelation do pause in confusion at verse 8:1, and a few pass over it altogether; but generally they must attempt to speak intelligibly about its significance – as not just another sound, and not simply the absence of sound. Anyone trying to give a theological or philosophical account of silence must undertake a similarly difficult task. Speak-

[1] Revelation 8:1. All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

ing, or even writing, about silence may look like a paradoxical or self-contradictory enterprise; but its difficulties are not obviously greater than the difficulties of speaking about God, and in both cases ways of speaking have repeatedly to be found and rediscovered – perhaps, as Augustine put it, "not in order to say something, but in order not to be silent."[2]

This book is an attempt to reflect theologically on silence – on God's silence and on human silences – in a context in which we have been said to experience both too little and too much silence. "Where shall the word be found, where will the word/Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence,"[3] wrote T. S. Eliot in 1930, and his description of the communicative situation finds even more resonances in the contemporary world. The sheer amount of public speech, communication, and the transfer of information has increased and continues to increase exponentially. At the same time, however, the silence of the divine voice, the authorial voice, whatever voices could authoritatively interpret a puzzling world or cause it to speak to us, is proclaimed.

Doing theology in the present context, we encounter silences of many kinds. There are the silences of biblical texts, both those that are marked as such and those that are notable only as absences from the text. There are numerous practices of silence, liturgical and otherwise, that form significant parts of the lives of Christians. Most strikingly, there are theological texts that draw attention to silence – in the rereading of apophatic theology or debates over deconstructionism, in critiques of the historical silencing of particular theological voices, or in the characterization of the secular age as one in which God is silent. Theological concern with the powers and limits of language, shaped both by shifts in philosophical thought and on older theological tradition, produces reflection on the relationship between speech and silence.[4]

[2] Augustine of Hippo, *On the Trinity*, book XV.

[3] T. S. Eliot, "Ash Wednesday," V. *Collected Poems: 1909–1962* (London: Faber & Faber, 1962), p. 102.

[4] Examples of recent work including extended discussion of "theological silence" in a specifically modern context are the collection of essays in Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Rebecca Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1989); Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

These theological reflections on silence are specific to our historical situation. They draw, however, on a long tradition wherein silence is a focus, not only of theological reflection per se, but of the engagement of theologians with a social and political context. Silence, both as practiced and as theorized, can mark a withdrawal or separation from "the world," a radical interruption of it, or a submission to its demands. Theology can take up speech on behalf of those who have been politically "silenced," or call for silence so that the single and unifying word of God can be heard. Looking at theological uses of the theme of "silence" draws attention both to how theology constructs itself as a form of communication, and to the wider communicative environment in which theological discourse is placed. Thinking about silence theologically confronts us with ethical and political questions. Even the silence of Revelation 8:1 has its implications for such questions; is silence being kept so that the prayers of the "saints," who have been silenced within the kingdoms of the world, can finally be heard?[5]

In this book, I ask how attention to the significance of silence, and to the significance of God's silence, can reshape understandings and practices of communication in the twenty-first century. I consider how Christian theology can and should challenge the patterns of communication that produce "wars of words," cacophonies of competing voices within which the weakest are silenced and the silent are passed over. It can do so on the basis of a different understanding of *God's* communication, one that gives priority to a listening silence, the silence in which God hears the world and thus opens up the possibility of innerworldly freedom. I shall argue, further, that people can learn not only to recognize this silence but also to share in it – that a theological ethics of communication can begin from "keeping God's silence."

But does it make any sense to talk about silence in this way? What can we say about silence that does not rely entirely on treating it as the opposite, or the absence, of something else – of sounds or utterances? The analysis of silence has been pursued within many disciplines, other than theology, in the twentieth century. Such analyses can be helpful in our attempts to understand the many "theological silences" – and to see ways through the inherent difficulties of speaking about silence.

[5] For an extended discussion of this view, see Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), pp. 70–83. See also G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St John the Divine* (London: Black's, 1966), pp. 106–7.

Studies in Silence

"There was silence in heaven for the space of half an hour." Silence is both something we encounter or discover – the silence of a deserted place, an empty room – and something we do, and experience as done by others – conversational silences, silences in response to questions. Silence is found, and silence is made; but often these two appear difficult to separate. Even Revelation's "silence in heaven" is made by those who fall silent – the angels, the singers, all the others whose voices and sounds have been heard so far – but it is then encountered by the writer and the reader as something that exceeds any of those performances of silence. We hear, not "they fell silent," but "there was silence." When we speak of *keeping* silence, we point to this relationship between silence as a reality we find and silence as part of our communicative activity; silence, the idiomatic expression suggests, is in some sense "already there," for us to discover and keep.[6]

The fact that silence can be treated both as part of conscious communicative activity and as a feature we discover in the world makes a *phenomenological* approach particularly helpful at the start of an attempt to talk about silence; an approach that centers on silence as something intended and experienced by the human mind, without needing in the first instance to determine its "objective" and "subjective," its found and made, components. Examining silence from this perspective can give us a starting-point for talking about silence as something not reducible to speech – or sound – or to its absence.

Bernhard Dauenhauer's work on *Silence: The Phenomenon and its Ontological Significance*[7] includes the analysis of philosophical texts, but focuses on silence as a general feature of human existence. Dauenhauer's hypothesis is that silence is a positive phenomenon, not merely the absence of something else, "at least equiprimordial with utterance" (p. 4), and in fact capable of being regarded as *prior* to speech or utterance. Starting from the fact that silence happens, both as something we do and as something we think about, he treats silence as a conscious communicative activity

[6] For discussion of the distinction between "silence as the absence of noise and silence as the cessation of speech" – a distinction that many languages can denote more clearly than can English – see Oliver Davies, "Soundings: Towards a Theological Poetics of Silence," in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[7] Bernard Dauenhauer, *Silence: The Phenomenon and Its Ontological Significance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980). Subsequent references in parentheses in the text.

that "makes sense." It is, in other words, an appropriate action within the world we inhabit, and it is part of how we make that world intelligible. If we understand why it makes sense to keep silence, Dauenhauer hypothesizes, we will understand something more, not just about silence, but about persons and the world they inhabit.

Dauenhauer begins with an analysis of some of the more obvious ways we *keep* silence, relating these silences at every point to the utterances – spoken or musical communicative activities – around and between which it occurs. For example, there is the phenomenon of "intervening silences" – the rests in a piece of music, the pauses between sentences or units of thought. Intervening silences divide the units of meaning-bearing sound one from another; but they also bind and join the parts of an utterance, each intervening silence bearing within it the meaning of both the preceding and the following "sound phrase" (pp. 6–7). The "fore-and-after silences" around an utterance, in turn, bind and join it to a wider field of speech and meaning, while at the same time "cutting" and setting a limit to the meaning-making of that particular utterance (p. 9).

Learning to appreciate silence as a positive phenomenon, even from the trivial examples of everyday speech, is learning that all utterance is surrounded by a "fringe of silence." So far, however, this analysis might leave silence subordinate to speech or utterance, as something that helps the latter along by rendering it comprehensible (where would be the sense in a constant flow of sound without silences to articulate it?), but that carries no significance of its own. Considering Revelation's "silence in heaven," by contrast, brings to mind the phenomenon of silences that are more significant than utterance – silences that appear, perhaps, to govern or determine utterance. When we begin to consider these deep silences – liturgical silences in many different traditions, the silence kept among intimates or at times of profound emotion – we are brought, as Dauenhauer sees it, closer to the "ontological significance" of this phenomenon. Silence – usually thought of in terms of its contrast with utterance – is found, when we consider "deep silence," to reflect a more general feature of all "mediating activity," all the activity by which people make sense of the world to themselves and to others (p. 16).

What is this general feature of our sense-making activity to which silence gives us particular access? Dauenhauer's analysis suggests that silence indicates the dependence of any utterance, any act of communication or making sense of the world, on something beyond itself and beyond *any other* determinate utterance. An attempt at making sense depends on something beyond itself to authenticate it in the claim it makes. Silences "interrupt" or "cut" the attempt, in utterance, fully to

determine oneself or the world. At the same time, they open the way for further, new communications or mediating acts; utterance needs silence if it is ever to begin.

On this view, then, silence as a phenomenon reveals both our finitude and our freedom as communicating and interpreting beings (pp. 158–9). On the one hand, people do not determine their world, but engage in their various mediating activities "in response to a gift." Keeping silence recalls speakers and utterances to this situation of "givenness" – the "givenness" of a tradition or a context, of the natural world, of our own capacity for utterance that had to be learned before it could be used. The deep silences of intimacy – or of liturgy as Dauenhauer analyzes it – bring people closer to some central aspect of their world's "givenness." On the other hand, however, silence reveals freedom – because the "givenness" of the world or of previous mediating activities cannot fully close off the possibilities for future mediation. Silence opens up these further possibilities; the "intervening silences" between utterances make some different utterance possible, and "deep silences" do not prevent, but rather become the sources of, further mediating activity.

There are, however, some silences that are experienced, not to open up new possibilities of mediating activity, but to forbid them – silences that Dauenhauer analyzes as instances of the phenomenon of "terminal silence" (p. 75). The "terminal silence" declares in a particular situation that no further act of mediation is possible. It is, for example, the silence that refuses to add further interpretation to an utterance, an action or a decision – that declares communication or interpretation, on a particular subject, *closed*. Dauenhauer's choice of the silence of Abraham, in the story of the offering of Isaac as a sacrifice (Genesis 22), as an example of the "terminal silence," points clearly to its theological relevance (p. 112). Following the famous analysis by Kierkegaard,[8] Abraham's silence throughout the story – speaking only to reinforce his determination to keep silent – is the deliberate refusal of mediating activity, because no "mediation" of his solitary decision of faith is possible. His silence reveals the limited character of all discourses, all attempts at mediation or interpretation – they cannot encompass or comprehend Abraham's decision, and his silence challenges any claim on their part to completeness or self-sufficiency.

The idea of a "terminal silence" is particularly relevant in the context of contemporary thought, because it has so often been suggested that the twentieth century confronts Western languages or cultures with a termi-

[8] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling; Repetition*, trans. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

nal silence. George Steiner's essays on *Language and Silence* uncover in various aspects of the twentieth-century experience the fragility of linguistic mediation and the possibility of its collapse into silence. Most importantly, Steiner discerns the pull towards a terminal silence – of "literature," but by implication of all new verbal mediations – in the face of the brutally unspeakable event of the *Shoah*.

> There is a widespread intimation, though as yet only vaguely defined, of a certain exhaustion of verbal resources in modern civilisation, of a brutalisation and devaluation of the word . . . The question of whether the poet should speak or be silent, of whether language is in a condition to accord with his needs, is a real one. "No poetry after Auschwitz," said Adorno.[9]

Steiner's account of the "silence of the poets," and of all the silences kept after the *Shoah*, raises very sharply the question of the "meaningfulness" of this silence. Is it a silence that "speaks" more profoundly than words do, that opens up another dimension of meaning, that is in some way "eloquent of God" as the silences of mystical poets are?[10] Or is it a silence that discloses only the "exhaustion of verbal resources," the collapse of all attempts at making sense of the world?[11]

While not discussing this historical context, Dauenhauer does suggest that the phenomenon of "terminal silence" pushes us towards questions about the ultimate ontological significance of silence. The terminal silence reveals the limitation of all particular utterances and of the whole "signitive domain" – the whole human enterprise of making sense of the world. It could thus be taken, he suggests, to signal either ultimate "futility" or "union with the Absolute" as the end to which all human utterances point. The phenomenon itself, he suggests, does not allow a decision for either, although it allows both possibilities to be entertained; a definitive conclusion about the significance of "terminal silence" would "outrun the available evidence" (pp. 160–1). Although he uses examples from religious practice and theological tradition – liturgical silence and silent prayer as examples of "deep silence," and Kierkegaard's reading of the silence of Abraham as an example of the "terminal silence," not to mention dis-

9 George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays 1958–1966* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), pp. 67, 75.

10 Ibid., p. 60.

11 See Graham Ward, "In the Daylight Forever? Language and Silence," in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. Denys Turner and Oliver Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002) for a more extended reading of Steiner in terms of these two alternatives.

cussions of the place of silence in Buddhist and Daoist thought – Dauenhauer is nonetheless clear that "nothing about silence itself . . . justifies the formulation of claims concerning God's existence or nature" (p. 172).

The phenomenology of silence suggests an initial framework within which "silence" can meaningfully be spoken about; but at the same time it declares its own inability to answer questions at the crucial point of the contemporary interrogation of silence – at the junction of theology, politics, and ethics. Is it the case that our finite attempts at meaning-making give way only to "ultimate futility" or to wordless union with the "Absolute?" Or is this, perhaps, as has been suggested in response to Steiner's similar claims, a false dichotomy, based on an equally false decision to absorb all attempts at sense-making into a "terminal silence?"[12] After all, Dauenhauer's own account suggests that the concept of a "terminal silence" is problematic; the phenomenon of silence, as ordinarily experienced, is such as to render questionable any attempt to make some utterance the "last word," or to forbid further speech.

Phenomenological analysis of silence cannot, of itself, give us a theology; nor does it seem to give us an ethics. Talking about silence as "binding and joining" and as "opening the way" for new mediating activities, however, seems to leave open a set of questions about the agency of silence. Does it make a difference *who* keeps silence, and towards what end? Does it make a difference, to the nature of the silence or of the utterances it makes possible, to what "givens" one attends and responds? Does it make a difference if the given is a person – so that silence is a response, not to something, but to someone?

Questions like these lie behind the very different approaches to silence taken by those thinkers who begin their work, not from phenomenology and the study of general features of human experience, but from communication theory, conversational analysis and the study of what silence "means" in particular contexts. The meanings of silences, for those who follow this course, are only determinable within particular contexts – as is the fact that any particular silence is meaningful, or communicatively relevant, at all.

Even if silence is not just the same as speech, particular acts of keeping silence do "say" something. We know that, sometimes, "silence gives consent," and that sometimes it rather refuses consent; we encounter silences of approval, disapproval, rebellion, disquiet, contentment. Particular acts of keeping silence do not *only* indicate the element of the pre-given and of the nondeterminate in all communication; they are also, themselves,

12 See Ward, "In the Daylight Forever?"

communicative. Studying the enormous range of cultural and political significances of silence raises the question of whether there is any sense in talking about silence *as such* in abstraction from particular silences. What could be the justification, after all, for placing the silence kept with the bereaved in western Apache culture[13] together with the silence of a defendant refusing to answer questions in a British court[14] and the silence of a Quaker meeting for worship[15] as examples of a single "phenomenon?"[16]

An approach that focuses on the contexts – cultural, social, and political – in which the meanings of silence are determined also suggests the ethical questions that the simple investigation of "silence, the phenomenon" may tend to obscure. Silence can be a shield to protect the powerful from public scrutiny; or a condition imposed from above on the powerless; or a mask for conflicts that are never permitted to emerge or be resolved. If we think about the silence imposed by totalitarian regimes on their critics, the silence of the prisoner in solitary confinement, the silence of an abused woman too scared to cry for help – on what basis can we assert that the "true" significance of any of these silences has to do with human freedom, or with the acceptance of finitude? Is it not irresponsible to interpret "silence" as a single phenomenon, and hence to obscure its function in violence and abuse?[17] To call an interpretation of silence "irresponsible" then raises the question of how and whether silence itself can be a "responsible" act – an ethically significant response to the requirements of a particular situation or a particular other. Analyses of silence on these lines remind us again of the importance of asking *who* keeps silence, and in relation to whom.

What are the implications, for a theological ethics of communication, of the conflicting tendencies found within talk about silence? In the first

[13] K. H. Basso, "To Give up on Words: Silence in Western Apache Culture," in *Language and Social Context*, ed. Pier P. Giglioli (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1972).

[14] Dennis Kurzon, "The Right of Silence: A Socio-Pragmatic Model of Interpretation," *Journal of Pragmatics* 23, 1 (1995).

[15] Richard Bauman, *Let Your Words Be Few: Symbolism of Speaking and Silence among Seventeenth-Century Quakers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983); see also chapter 6.

[16] See further Deborah Tannen and Muriel Savile-Troike, *Perspectives on Silence* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex 1985), and especially the introductory essay by Savile-Troike, for accounts of this differentiated approach to silence in communication studies.

[17] Langdon Gilkey, in responding to Dauenhauer's book, describes his experience in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp, which included the extensive experience of solitary confinement. Silence in those circumstances, he writes, is "in no sense a form of *self*-expression," and appears as the absolute negation of communication. Langdon Gilkey, "The Political Meaning of Silence," in *Philosophy Today* 27, 2 (1983).

place, I shall affirm, within this study, the basic insight that silence is not the equivalent either of speech or of its absence; and the further insight, that to regard silence in this way requires some wider claim about the nature of existence. I have already indicated the presence of silence as a "phenomenon" both in theological texts and in Christian practice. I shall assume that the keeping of silence can be a right response to the prior givenness of a context of speech and action, a response that reveals and enacts human freedom. At the same time, I want to take seriously the distortions of communicative situations that can make such a "responsible silence" impossible; and I want to suggest that an undifferentiated statement about silence as such, that affirms it as a phenomenon with positive significance, would be politically and ethically irresponsible. This latter suggestion is particularly important in the light of twentieth-century critiques of acts of violent silencing, historical and contemporary.

Above all, the question about the "who" – "Who keeps silence?"– must, I shall claim, be central to the treatment of silence in the theological ethics of communication. An ethics of communication must ask about the persons whose silence is being theorized and evaluated; a theological account of silence must ask about the place of silence in the identity and the self-identification of God. In thinking about the latter point, however, we seem to go beyond the limits of both phenomenology and conversation analysis.

God's Silence

> Nothing creaturely is so like God as silence. (Meister Eckhart, *Deutsche Predigten Und Traktaten*[18])

> O Sabbath rest by Galilee!
> O calm of hills above,
> Where Jesus knelt to share with Thee

[18] Meister Eckhart, *Deutsche Predigten Und Traktaten*, trans. J. Quint (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1955), p. 367; ". . . *aber gleicht nichts in allen Kreaturen Gott so sehr wie Ruhe*." The English translation of the Quint volume (Meister Eckhart, *German Sermons and Treatises*, trans. M. O'C. Walshe, 2 vols., vol. 2 (London: Watkins, 1981), p. 14.) translates *Ruhe* as "rest" rather than "silence;" accuracy would appear to lie somewhere in between, but the quotation is more widely known as referring to "silence" (for an example of its more popular usage, see Joachim-Ernst Berendt, *The Third Ear: On Listening to the World*, trans. Tim Nevill (Shaftesbury: Element, 1988), p. 102).

The silence of eternity
Interpreted by love!
(John Greenleaf Whittier, "The Brewing of Soma"[19])

The "deep silences" of which Dauenhauer speaks can be interpreted, as he himself realizes, as gestures toward God – God as the context in which the finitude and the freedom of human utterance is defined. Within theological tradition, there is a persisting claim that silence is a particularly appropriate gesture toward God; silence is that creaturely reality that is least unlike God.[20] Monastic writers associated the difficulties they encountered in speaking about their practices of silence with the difficulties of speaking about God;[21] a rich tradition of mystical theology takes up Pseudo-Dionysius' prayer for ascent to the "brilliant darkness of a hidden silence."[22] If we accept this, to say that "God is silent" is not only to describe our experience of a particular historical moment; it is to say something about how, or who, God is.

The phenomenological analysis of silence, discussed above, indicates certain respects in which it might be the case that "nothing is so like God as silence." To affirm God as Creator – as recent studies in mystical theology have recalled – is to affirm that God is different from the world, in a way that transcends all the ways in which things within the world differ one from another. Speech is appropriate for distinguishing created things one from another; but silence, in going beyond all the distinctions speech can make, is the best communicative "likeness" for the God who transcends all the distinctions between created things. We can go further; it is suggested that silence is neither the absence of speech nor its equivalent. It does not differ from utterances in the way that they differ one from another, and it does not differ from them as simply their negation or their absence, and yet it is in some way related to them. A very similar account of the relations of "difference" between God and creation under-

[19] John Greenleaf Whittier, "The Brewing of Soma"; reprinted in part in *Quaker Faith and Practice: The Book of Christian Discipline of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*, (London: Quaker Home Service, 1994), extract 20.03.

[20] Noting that there is a difference between the claims "there is nothing so like God as silence" and "silence is like God;" the former continues to emphasize the *lack* of resemblance between God and creatures. Compare Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 35.

[21] See on this Paul F. Gehl, "Competens Silentium: Varieties of Monastic Silence in the Medieval West," in *Viator* (1987), 125–6.

[22] Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystical Theology, in the Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist, 1987), p. 997.

lies the practice of apophatic theology – not simply denying all creaturely attributes of God, but denying even their negation.[23]

The paradox here is that to say silence is in some way "like" God is apparently to say nothing of what God is "like." It is, rather, to indicate how God's nature transcends our ways of comprehending it. More than this, it is, within the patristic and medieval traditions of negative theology, to say that God's nature is *as such* incomprehensible; not, then, that we happen not to have the right set of verbal or conceptual tools, but that the subject matter itself cannot be spoken or conceived. Saying that God is silent, or that "nothing is so like God as silence," is, for these theologians, not only saying something about our own inability to comprehend God; it is saying something about who God is in Godself, even if it is a paradoxical "something," a something that does not enable us to claim comprehension of God.

I have said that I attempt, in this book, to articulate a way of thinking about silence, and especially about God's silence, that neither reduces it to an absence of speech nor absorbs it into speech. In doing this, I shall affirm the importance of acknowledging a silence of God that is *not* just the reverse side of the limitations of people's knowledge of God; and a silence of God that has something to do, not only with how God is in relation to the world, but with who God is in relation to Godself. Learning from the extended analyses of silence undertaken within non-theological disciplines, however, produces the need to ask further questions about the silence of God – what kind of silence is it, and what does it do? Most importantly, as the prerequisite for an answer to any of these questions – who is the God who keeps it?

The key insight I take from the studies in communication theory, used above to qualify the idea of silence as a single "phenomenon" with an "ontological significance," is that silence as communicative practice is relational and personal. In order to understand silence, we must ask: who keeps silence? And in relation to whom? Is any particular silence the denial of personhood, the suppression of a relationship, the closing off of all further possibilities of communication; or is it a silence that opens up such possibilities? The answer in any case, as this discussion has already suggested, cannot be given on the level of the analysis of silence as such. When we are talking about the silence that forms the ground of all our utterances, the context of their freedom and finitude, there is no particular reason, from the analysis of silence, to interpret it as a silence that relates to us rather than as a silence that cuts off – as if uttered into a void

[23] On which see Turner, *Darkness of God*.

– all our attempts at meaning-making. In fact, everything depends, in this matter, on whether and how the silence of eternity is truly "interpreted by love."

I shall be exploring here, in conjunction both with philosophical and ethical accounts of silence and with biblical and theological tradition, what it means for the "silence of eternity" to be the silence of the God who is love. There is, however, a problem with an account of divine silence that would make it in some way fundamental to who God is. How can such an account be given in the light of the far stronger biblical and traditional assertion that God *speaks*? God does – so it is repeatedly asserted within Christian theology – reveal Godself within creation in ways that both have the character of speech and can be spoken about, and does not hide in silence; and this speech of God in creation is grounded in the identity of God. In the context of the belief that God speaks and has spoken a definitive Word in which God is fully revealed, the attribution of silence to God can easily appear misleading, erroneous, even dangerous.

Such a challenge from the perspective of Christian theology is mirrored by external challenges to "poor little talkative Christianity."[24] Raoul Mortley, in an important historical account of the philosophical and theological meanings of silence, argues that Christian theology was never able to appropriate the great "leap into silence" taken by the Neoplatonic philosophers.[25] Silence, he claims, both as a practice and as a supposed divine attribute, was too anti-institutional, too subversive of any given way of knowing God, for a theology grounded in a definitive and comprehensive revelation. As I shall explore in my next chapter, an implicit and explicit critique of the supposed inability of Christian theology adequately to think silence is articulated in contemporary feminist thought. Here, the critique is linked to a specifically ethical and political concern. Christian speech, and Christianity's emphasis on speech, is interpreted as an attempt to seize and maintain control, not only over the expression and conceptualization of divinity, but thereby over the capacity to shape social structures and values.

A theology, and especially a theological ethics, that takes silence seriously has to respond to these challenges. In response to the suggestion that it is wrong to focus on divine silence in the context of Christian assertions that God speaks, it would be possible simply to say that this work is a correction of the theological balance. If God has so often and

[24] E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (London: Arnold, 1929).

[25] Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Bonn: Hanstein, 1986), p. 254.