



Silence: A Christian History

Diarmaid MacCulloch

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A provocative history of the role of silence in Christianity by the award-winning, *New York Times* bestselling author

In this essential work of religious history, the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Christianity* explores the vital role of silence in the Christian story.

How should one speak to God? Are our prayers more likely to be heard if we offer them quietly at home or loudly in church? How can we really know if God is listening? From the earliest days, Christians have struggled with these questions. Their varied answers have defined the boundaries of Christian faith and established the language of our most intimate appeals for guidance or forgiveness.

MacCulloch shows how Jesus chose to emphasize silence as an essential part of his message and how silence shaped the great medieval monastic communities of Europe. He also examines the darker forms of religious silence, from the church's embrace of slavery and its muted reaction to the Holocaust to the cover-up by Catholic authorities of devastating sexual scandals.

A groundbreaking work that will change our understanding of the most fundamental wish to be heard by God, *Silence* gives voice to the greatest mysteries of faith.

Silence: A Christian History Details

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Author : Diarmaid MacCulloch

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From Reader Review Silence: A Christian History for online ebook

Patdr says

I had very mixed feelings about this book while reading it. I didn't come into it with much more than an elementary understanding of the early (or even not so early) history of Christianity. So I learned a great deal but I am sure it wasn't an ideal way to get to the main story line. The author is occasionally snarky about particular individuals or approaches to church history. That probably kept the lectures on which this is based lively and entertaining but was off putting to me in the course of a scholarly (there is a lot of material in the footnotes!) work.

MacCulloch devotes most attention to the misdeeds, faults, power struggles, of the church. So he provides fodder for perspectives that see the role of religion in general and Christianity in particular as malign. He offers discrete apologies for this both at the outset and the conclusion so I am pretty sure his attitude is more nuanced.

I probably came to the book with misplaced expectations, not expecting an account of historic battles between Silence and Noise in the history of churches (I'm not convinced these are reasonable polarities around which to arrange that history) but maybe something more reflective as in Shusaku Endo's novel (and Scorsese's film) or some of Simone Weil's writing.

Jon says

I expected this to be mostly about meditative practice and contemplative worship in the history of Christianity, and it certainly included those things. But MacCulloch's idea of silence was much broader than mine. He thinks of the frequent and ominous silence of God turning his face away in the Old Testament, the wondrous silence of the resurrection, the church's silence about the role of women prior to the last fifty years, its silence about homosexuality, and its silences about slavery, the holocaust, and child abuse, along with the imposed silences of book-burning and heresy-hunting. He talks about the noisiness of the reformation and the protestant insistence on loudly preaching the word from scripture, as opposed to quiet Quaker meditative practice. A very dense book which occasionally assumed I know more than I do, but I nevertheless learned a great deal. It could almost be used as a foreword to his huge *Christianity: the First Three Thousand Years*, which he frequently footnotes for readers who want further information on a subject.

RK-isme says

Okay, it wasn't that bad. 2.5 stars.

I have to say that I was greatly disappointed by this book. Based on MacCulloch's Gifford Lectures in 2011, I had expected a coherent discussion of 'silence' as a practiced concept within the Christian tradition. It was that, but only to a small degree. Unfortunately, I also found it to be a hodgepodge of other things.

MacCulloch expands the concept of 'silence' from a religious concept to include other forms of silence, in particular, the silence of various religious institutions in regard to their own guilt. Having read his history of Christianity, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*, and being a big fan of that book, I felt let down by a book which meanders through various topics. Everything becomes 'silence':

"Not only did Tacitus's name, in a happy coincidence, suggest the theme of silence, but he provided a convenient talking point in his careful (though not approving) picture of the tyrannical Emperor Tiberius, a

constant if not always effective practitioner of dissimulation."

Here, as in many places, there is a great stretch to get to 'silence'. Neither Tacitus's name nor Tiberius's dissimulation lead naturally to the concept of 'silence'.

I suspect that MacCulloch either needed filler or wanted to go on a bit of a rant against established religions which did not fit very well within the theme of the Gifford Lectures, to "promote and diffuse the study of Natural Theology in the widest sense of the term—in other words, the knowledge of God". However broadly that may be interpreted, I'm not sure that attacking various Christian institutions and individuals for their role in persecuting Jews, abusing children and oppressing women and homosexuals. While doing that can be quite laudable, it is so for reasons far beyond 'silence'.

For the first part of the book, MacCulloch does address 'silence' in various forms within Christianity, but even there I found there to be a great deal of extraneous information and not enough insight as to the role of silence to either the institutions or the individuals, beyond keeping the noise down in monasteries. What was the experience of living in full or partial silence to the monks and nuns? Did these individuals have deeper or more relevant religious experiences? Other than some comments from Teresa of Avila, we do not know.

Perhaps part of the fault lies with my expectations, but this book is filled with pages of information that, while they may be interesting in themselves, do not relate to 'silence'. Indeed, I found much of the meandering to be of interest. Sort of a collection of trivia to impress people at parties, should I ever get invited to one (not likely.)

Steve says

A fascinating survey of 2000+ years of Judeo-Christian history, focusing on the silences in that story. The silence of God, the silence of monks, the silence of slavery and the holocaust, and much more.

Rachel says

I enjoyed it and learnt a lot I didn't expect to find here.

Lucy Traves says

I found this book deeply disappointing. It took a fascinating subject and splashed about in the shallows. It was also very disjointed, its genesis as a series of lectures is all too evident. It's a shame as it has the bones of a very good book in it.

Michael says

A fabulous read by the eminent Diarmaid MacCulloch of Oxford University. After having read some of his

other books, most notably his biography of Thomas Cranmer and "The First Three Thousand Years" (2011) I was curious how he would treat this topic, especially in light of controversies within my own denomination, the Seventh-day Adventist Church with controversies over contemplative prayer. MacCulloch weaves a narrative that begins in Scripture. God is a God who communicates and breaks silence, although there are notable examples of silence in Scripture. The early Christian Church was a noisy Church, as was the Reformation. He also traces the history of ascetics and monks, with the wide variety of perspectives, both eastern and western. The way Christians worship, in terms of noise versus silence, tells far more than most people realize about their faith--whether it is church bells, the organ, or the silence to not speak up against evil (i.e. the holocaust or slavery). Altogether it made me think in new ways about church history.

Holly says

Silence is not difficult to read or particularly scholarly, as some reviewers have complained. (As a scholarly indexer I know academic writing, and this is not scholarly.) But it assumes a groundwork of knowledge on the part of the reader and it is highly detailed, while at the same time vague and meandering. What I mean is: these were originally lectures and as such cover a lot of ground quite quickly and without depth. The prose reads/sounds complex until one realizes it's often just a lot of names and retellings of Christian church history that other writers (and MacCulloch himself) have written about in more detail. Silence in Christianity can mean many things: it's been sought, disparaged, elevated, hidden, sanctified, shameful, and politically necessitated. I don't have any points to quibble with, nor praise, nor anything to really dwell on. It's not a bad book, and often quite interesting, but it left me dazed.

Avril says

Warning - do not read this book without a basic understanding of Christian history or copies of MacCulloch's *A History of Christianity and Reformation: Europe's House Divided* beside you. This book is based on a lecture series and MacCulloch assumes a fair amount of knowledge in his hearers/readers. But for those who have that knowledge, or access to it, it's an educational read.

As someone who has always leaned towards religious silence I was surprised to discover what a minority tradition is in Judaism and Christianity. I knew that my own strand of Protestant Christianity was very Word-driven, but I hadn't realised that even in Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism, let alone in the Tanakh, sound has usually overwhelmed silence.

MacCulloch doesn't just write about the history of silence in the Scriptures, worship and theology, but also about those silences necessary for survival (Iberian Jews, Anglo-Catholic homosexuals) and those silences for which the Church must repent (on anti-semitism, slavery and sexuality). Whistle-blowers who bravely overcome institutional silence have their own section.

There are some great quotes in here, of which I think my favourite is attributed to Canon W. H. Vanstone: "The Church is like a swimming pool in which all the noise comes from the shallow end." I love it!

MacCulloch ends with a brief comment on the importance of history in religion. So naturally I'm going to rate this book highly and encourage others to read it.

Al Bità says

Trying to do justice to this type of book always leaves me in two (or more!) minds...

On the one hand, this beautifully written work should provide much pleasure for Christians wanting an excellent overview of the subject. My only caveat here is that the background history is extensive and quite scholarly, and possibly this quality might ultimately alienate a casual reader; but for those who persist, there is much that is enlightening and interesting, and if it were only for that (and for the quality of the writing) I would rate this 5 stars...

Based on a series of lectures given by the author (but let not the reader misinterpret this: there is no dullness here — just erudition, and beautiful writing) the book is essentially in four parts: the first deals with the Bible, both relevant Christian prehistory from the Old Testament (OT)) and aspects from the New Testament; part two deals with Monastic silence (covering the periods 100–451 CE and 451–1100 C); part three deals with the question of silence through Three Reformations (covering the periods 700–1500 CE and 1500–1700 CE); and the final part (perhaps the most interesting for contemporary readers) which is entitled ‘Reaching behind Noise in Christian History’ and has the sub-headings “Silence for Survival”; Things Not Remembered”; and “Silence in Present and Future Christianities”.

As will be apparent from even such a cursory summary, the definition of the word “silence” has many meanings, starting, perhaps, with the OT one where it is associated with death (the silence that comes with death). Other meanings include more basic meanings such as simply the absence of speaking; silent praying; etc. And then there are other more complex meanings such as the silence of meditation (which can be either text based or not); contemplation (which could be linked with, say, architectural awe; or contemplation on stained-glass windows; or listening to (appropriate) music, or even simply to the sounds of Nature; to the more ecstatic silence accompanying mystical experiences (again, usually where (according to those experiencing them) some supernatural being or other communicates to the mystic in various ways. The more extreme mind-obliterating aim of certain Buddhist and Hindu sects is hardly mentioned, but while the reported experiences of certain Christian mystics might suggest similar moments, it appears to me that this is not really seen as part of the Christian tradition. The more sinister meanings of “silence” covered in part four usually relate to questions of power, authority, secrecy, etc. and often used to mislead, confound, frighten, defend and control.

So the territory covered is extensive and comparatively comprehensive. This is a Christian analysis of the matter, presented within the Christian historical narrative, and valuable if only for that. But therein lies my problem with this book. I found myself wondering what the narrative might be like if there were other histories of Silence (e.g. Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, etc.). What differences would one find? What similarities? What alternatives? This book is so ensconced within the Christian tradition that self-satisfied Christians could just cuddle up in cosy repose and relish in the comfort it provides.

Note that this is more specific to the first three chapters rather than to the final one; but overall, the book can be said to provide a kind of *apologia* justifying only the Christian point of view, such is the richness and complexity surrounding this matter. One must be a careful and attentive reader indeed to realise within this protective wall of feathery comfort, MacCulloch can be gently critical. Personally, I would have been happier with a more robust commentary every now and then, if only to ruffle the feathers a little, and thus make the reader a little more discomforted when the situation called for it. One specific instance relates to Simon Stylites (the original one, I think — I was not aware that there was another, later one). This Simon was so offensive and extreme in his asceticism that numerous monasteries evicted him as being a danger to others. His “fame” for deciding to live his later life atop a pillar is more reflective of his *rejection* by normal monasteries, not an affirmation of his superior saintliness; his actions today would be considered insane; and the fact that the ordinary people interpreted this insanity and misunderstood this for sanctity should not be

interpreted as a sign of holiness, or for emulation!

Worse, in my opinion, is the general feeling that mystical individuals and/or groups were somehow part and parcel of a generally accepted orthodoxy. They weren't. True, there were ever present, and always forming or re-forming, despite persecutions and ostracisms on a regular basis. Mystics and mysticism was more often seen as anathema: their claims to have direct and untrammelled connections with God obviated the need for a Church, or for priests and sacraments: they were preferably forcefully, painfully and thoroughly eliminated, and the silence of death was often considered as the only ideal option. As a rule, mystics were barely tolerated, and even then very reluctantly, but only if it could be confirmed that they would not pose any direct or indirect threat to the autonomy and magisterium of the established orthodox religion.

The resultant surviving mystical groups and contemplative orders went "silent" in another interpretation of the word, and managed to perpetuate and sustain what I would consider to be the most successful con jobs in history (and it is not just the Christian ones that I am referring to here: all established organisations that call themselves religious have mystics or their equivalents): they have managed to get the more superstitious of their followers to feed, clothe and house them for actively doing nothing in return; they have convinced them that their ascetic lifestyle (essentially a rejection of both human and natural reality) is sacred and holy. What their acolytes take from their own sacrifices is a misconceived belief that, imperfect as the acolytes are, they will gain some "spiritual" retribution for their imperfection, with many often giving their whole lives, property and incomes over for the care and maintenance of their "superiors". Acolytes have created a "meaning" for their lives where there is no meaning to be found.

Some might feel I am being too harsh here; but I cannot in all honesty resile from my statements. I cannot help thinking, for example, what sort of a book would result if, instead of "Silence" it were "Poverty, A Christian History"; or "Chastity, A Christian History"; or how about "Homosexuality, A Christian History"? or what if Judaism; Islam; Hinduism; Buddhism or any other religious group or affiliation were to replace the word "Christian" in the title? True, this is not fair criticism of MacCulloch's work which, as I pointed out earlier is quite superb in what it does. But these extraneous thoughts disturb me. All I can say is, read MacCulloch by all means, and enjoy the writing and the erudition; but at the same time I must also add: *caveat lector!*

Adam Shields says

Short Review: Diarmaid MacCulloch is an excellent historian. And the riffs off the idea of silence, while interesting as individual ideas are not cohesive. So on the whole the book lacks focus and organization. My problem is that it seems like MacCulloch is saying that there is no correlation within the idea of silence. So silence can be good, it can be bad, it can be sinful, it can be holy, it can be transcendent, etc. But if it can be everything then I am not sure what the point of the book is, other than to say 'hey here are some essays on silence.'

I do appreciate MacCulloch's outsider status to Christianity. So he can talk about gnostics without feeling the need to defend orthodoxy. But at the same time MacCulloch does not seem to need to denigrate Christianity because he is not a Christian himself. So MacCulloch plays a useful role as a historian. I think my real disappointment is that I thought this would be better because I so much enjoy his last book.

My full review is on my blog at <http://bookwi.se/silence/>

Colin Heber-Percy says

The reviews for "Silence: A Christian History" were universally positive. So perhaps it's me... I found this disappointing. The title of the book suggested that MacCulloch was intending here to investigate and explore - not a church, or an institution, or a period of history - but an idea. At no point, however, does he examine in any real depth the concept of silence itself. Instead he uses a rather vague definition of silence as a vehicle to go over some old ground - from the birth of Christianity in Judaism and Hellenism, through the early church, the various reformations and so on. He's always excellent and insightful with the history, but I thought there might be a little more analysis of silence itself and its role in the shaping of liturgy, Christian spirituality and theology.

He's better on the negative aspects of silence - in modern cover-ups and failures to engage with moral, political, personal dilemma and guilt. Silence as Nicodemism. But there's more to silence than that, isn't there?

MargCal says

Finished reading ... Silence: a Christian History / Diarmaid MacCulloch – 11 July 2017

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2.5 stars

I'm not sure what I was expecting from this book as I bought it some time ago based on a review I cannot now find. What I got was certainly not like anything I might have expected.

The book runs pretty much chronologically through history from (Jewish and Christian) biblical times to the present however it seems more like a grab-bag of ideas taken from snapshots of history rather than a coherent narrative. That's not to say it doesn't give you lots to think about from a variety of angles. On the other hand, some ideas of silence are hardly exclusive to Christianity, e.g. the silence of staying in the (gay) closet has applied, and still does, in too many cultures and situations far beyond Christian Churches, as does covering up mistakes and crimes, personal, institutional and corporate.

The writing is fine, quite witty at times, and there is an extensive bibliography and lots of footnotes if you want to follow up any particular idea. However, if there isn't a better book on Christian silence out there, there is one waiting to be written.

Ben Thurley says

A nicely written, if slightly rambling and disjointed, series of essays on various forms of "silence" in Jewish and Christian history. MacCulloch touches on silence as a form of prayer or contemplation, silence as survival strategy (which he refers to as Nicodemism) for persecuted or reviled minorities, and the silence of things left unsaid or covered up in order to protect the institution of the church and deny its culpability in such horrors as The Holocaust, slavery or child sexual abuse .

It's an interesting read and covers a lot of history (about three thousand years give or take) through an unusual lens.

Jean-Daniel says

Being in silence does not mean only not to have anything to say or to do not know how to express oneself. It is the attitude that permits to listen – first of all to yourself, then to the others – and last but not least – to God.

The Book gives also the historical (as seen from the Bible and the history of the Church), spiritual and somehow I do dare to say social (or cultural) parcours of silence.

The author does not hesitate to bring up also the difficult topics, where he considers that Church remained silent when it was time to speak up and so the attitude of silence became rather the one of secrecy.

It is true – the book of Diarmaid MacCulloch is rather historical one (compared to the spiritual tracts of Thomas Merton or others) – so some knowledge of the connections and associations is necessary, but still written in very simple language makes it available to the greater public.
