



The Sound of Silence

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ESSAY

I TRIED TO imagine how the authors of the old texts that I read would have reacted to the phrase “the silence of God.” Probably they would have muttered, “Try listening for once.” Or they might have quoted the Qur’anic verse, “They have hearts but they do not understand with them, they have eyes but they do not see with them, they have ears but they do not hear with them” (7:179).

The word *silence* (in Arabic, *ṣamt*) is the opposite of *speech* (*kalām*). Muslim theologians and philosophers consider speech an essential attribute of the divine reality. In other words, by definition, God speaks, constantly and forever, whether or not there are listeners to hear. In the

same way, to mention a typical list of other essential attributes, God is alive, knowing, desiring, powerful, seeing, and hearing; He has these qualities by virtue of the very definition of God, without regard to anything other than God. In short, for the Islamic tradition, to talk of God’s silence would be like talking about God’s death or His stupidity or His incapacity. Such talk is fine for a modern academy, but it would have sounded absurd to Muslim intellectuals.

If God speaks due to His essence, that means He speaks eternally, outside time. Inside time, His speech never stops. His creative word “Be!” (*kun*) is an eternal word whose fruit is “the being” (*al-kawn*),

Autumn in the River Valley, Guo Xi, circa 1070

also called “the universe” (*al-‘ālam*). If something enters into being, it will also depart from being, for nothing has real existence (*wujūd*) but the Real Being, the Necessary Existence of the philosophers. “There is nothing in existence but God,” as the great al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) frequently remarked. In the words of the Qur’an, “Everything is perishing but His face” (18:88). The point is made nicely by the poet Labīd in a line the Prophet called “the truest verse spoken by the Arabs”:

Is not everything other than God unreal
and every bliss inescapably evanescent?

The Qur’an uses the word *unreal* (*bāṭil*, which also means “false, wrong, vain”) as the opposite of real, true, right (*ḥaqq*). As a Qur’anic divine name, *al-Ḥaqq* designates the Real, the True, the Reality. Everything other than God is in itself *bāṭil*: unreal, false, vain. In *The Metaphysics of The Healing [Al-Shifā’]*, Avicenna (d. 1037), the greatest of the Muslim peripatetic philosophers, tells us that *ḥaqq* means “real” when applied to existent things and “true” when applied to statements. Concerning the first sense of *ḥaqq*, he writes, “By Its essence the Necessary Existence is the Real constantly.... Hence everything other than the one Necessary Existence is unreal in itself.”¹ In his commentary on the divine name *al-Ḥaqq*, al-Ghazālī explains the point in more detail. He clarifies that unreal things gain a borrowed reality only when God brings them into being.

Everything about which a report may be given is either absolutely unreal, absolutely real, or real in one respect and unreal in another respect. That which is impossible by essence is the absolutely unreal. That which is necessary by essence is the absolutely real. That which is possible by essence... is real

in one respect and unreal in another....

By this, you will recognize that the absolutely real is the True Existence by Its essence, and every real thing takes its reality from It.²

* * *

To speak is to express awareness. God’s speech expresses His eternal knowledge and awareness of all things. God’s speech is real, true, and authoritative; the speech of anything else, in and of itself, is unreal, false, and unreliable. Only inasmuch as the Real bestows speech on others do they talk.

The Qur’an often calls God’s speech “the command” (*al-amr*). Those who speak of God’s silence seem to have in mind what theologians call “the religious command” (*al-amr al-dīnī*) or “the prescriptive command” (*al-amr al-taklīfī*). When God issues a religious command, as in prophetic mes-

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sages generally, He verbalizes instructions to His human servants. Whatever authority Muslim jurists may possess stems from their claim to speak on behalf of this religious command.

The second sort of command is creative (*khalqī*), also called engendering (*takwīnī*, i.e., that which bestows *kawn*, being). It is mentioned, for example, in the verse “His command, when He desires a thing, is to say to it, ‘Be!’ and it comes to be” (Qur’an 36:82). Discussion of this sort of speech was carried out by philosophers, theologians, and many Sufi teachers. Their explanations focused on the essence and attributes of the Necessary Existence. They



Early Spring, Guo Xi, circa 1072

offered many arguments and cited various Qur'anic verses to support the notion that the universe itself is God's speech. For example, the Qur'an uses the word *sign* (*āyah*) to designate both its own verses and created phenomena (whether in the world or inside the self). This indicates that things in the world and God's spoken words have the same status in relation to their creator. If scriptural signs are words, then created things are also words. And clearly, signs have significance, and words have meanings.

Meaning (*ma'nā*) in Islamic texts is used in two basic ways: as the opposite of *word* or *articulation* (*lafz*) and as the opposite of *form* (*ṣūrah*). Just as words have meanings that need to be understood, so also forms have meanings. God is the form-giver (*al-Muṣawwir*, Qur'an 59:24), who "formed you, so He made your forms beautiful" (49:64). God expresses meaning with

signs—that is, by uttering the words of scripture and voicing the forms that make up the realm of being. Commentators see an allusion to the infinity of these words and forms in the verse, "Though all the trees in the earth were pens, and the sea and seven seas after it were to provide ink, yet the words of God would not be spent" (31:27).

In sum, the creative command is God's speech inasmuch as it bestows being on the universe and all it contains. The prescriptive command is God's speech inasmuch as it addresses human beings by means of prophets and scriptures. Unlike prescriptive speech, creative speech cannot be disobeyed. People can certainly deny it or ignore it, but they cannot act against it, because it brings them into being along with everything they think, say, and do.

One might ask why theologians claim that the one God has two commands. He

Himself says, “Our command is but one, like the blink of an eye” (54:50). In fact, the religious command is implicit in the creative command and is its corollary. All things obey the creative command by existing, but human beings have the peculiar ability to question their own existence, an ability that has everything to do with self-awareness. They are aware of self because they were created in the form of the infinitely self-aware. They possess the seven essential attributes of the divine: life, knowledge (awareness, consciousness), will, power, speech, hearing, and seeing. They also have the potential to display the remaining divine attributes, attributes that are often summarized as the “ninety-nine most beautiful names” of God.

Another common list of the seven essential divine attributes replaces hearing and seeing with generosity and justice. Many theologians see these two as a reference to two basic categories of complementary divine names that reverberate throughout the universe. They refer to these two categories of complementary names as gentleness and severity or mercy and wrath or beauty and majesty or bounty and justice. When God created human beings in His metaphysical image, He filled them with the apparently conflicting demands of these two sorts of names. The names of mercy pull toward paradise, and the names of wrath push toward hell (fortunately, as the Prophet said, “God’s mercy takes precedence over His wrath”). The traces of these attributes, found both inside and outside the human self, have obvious implications for morality and ethics, not to mention the achievement of nearness to God, which is taken as the final goal of religion.

The religious command addresses human *free choice* (*ikhtiyār*)—that is, the

fact that people are constantly faced with choices and that these should be good (*khayr*). The basic role of this command is to provide real criteria by which people can differentiate good choices from bad, right choices from wrong. In other words, the command instructs people on how to choose the real and rightfully due (*ḥaqq*) rather than the unreal and inappropriate.

At first sight, the religious command exists because people are out of touch with reality and need divine guidance to lead the good life. At a deeper level, when God issues instructions concerning right speech, right acts, and right intentions, He makes people responsible for the degree to which

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they conform with truth, right, and reality. In the measure of this responsibility, they will be held accountable for overcoming unreality and clinging to the real—not in this life, but in the next, where paradise and hell are the actual situation. God’s justice will not let people be rewarded or punished unless they are actually responsible for their words and deeds. Hence the existence of paradise and hell, each of which has innumerable degrees and domains, depends upon the existence of human beings in this world, for they are the only creatures (along with the jinn, but that is another story) who have responsibility and accountability. In other words, the religious command plays the role of completing the creative command by bringing into

existence countless worlds of posthumous possibility that would have no *raison d'être* without human free choice.

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To say that God is real means that God alone is real and everything else is unreal. To say that God speaks is to say that God alone speaks and everything else is silent. But if things do in fact receive a certain reality from the Real, they also receive a certain speaking from the Speaker. As Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240) explains, the divine speech brought all things into existence: “We emerged from speech. That is His word, ‘Be!’ so we came to be. Silence is a state of nonexistence, and speech is a state of existence.”³ Since everything that exists is the speech of God, “There is no silence whatsoever in the universe, for silence is nonexistence, and speech is constant.”⁴

In short, everything other than God is real inasmuch as it is God’s speech, but unreal and silent in itself. Created things are the speech of God, and the words they speak are spoken through them, not by them. All words and forms are simply articulations of the engendering command. Ibn ʿArabī explains:

The Real speaks to the servants constantly while they stay silent, giving ear constantly in all of their states, whether moving or resting, standing or sitting, for their hearing is given over to the Real’s speech. They never cease hearing the Real’s command that engenders the states and guises that come to be within them. Neither the servants nor the universe is empty for one instant of the existence of engendering, so they never cease listening and they never cease being silent. It is impossible for them to enter

in along with Him in His speech. So, when you hear servants speaking, that is the Real’s engendering within them. The servants remain silent in their root, standing before Him, for no one ever hears anything but the engenderings of the Real.⁵

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A generation before Ibn ʿArabī was born, Aḥmad Samʿānī (d. 1140), a Shāfiʿī jurist from Merv, wrote a six-hundred-page book explaining the meanings of the divine names, apparently for the benefit of his students at the Nizamiyya Madrasa. Called *The Repose of the Spirits* (*Rawḥ al-arwāḥ*), it was the first book in this theological genre to be written in Persian, and one of the longest. Aḥmad was a member of a prominent scholarly family, but his relatives’ books were much better known, probably because they were written in Arabic. His father, Abū al-Muzaffar Maṣṣūr Samʿānī (d. 1096), wrote several, including a well-known commentary on the Qurʾan and two published works on jurisprudence. Aḥmad’s nephew and student in jurisprudence, Abū Saʿd ʿAbd al-Karīm Samʿānī (d. 1166), wrote widely used books on the biography of scholars. Aḥmad’s *Repose of the Spirits* remained almost forgotten until it was published in 1989, though a few early authors copied passages from it without mentioning their source.

Samʿānī undertook the explication of God’s names in order to bring out the reality of the Real and the unreality of everything else. What sets his book apart from earlier books on theology is that it focuses on the divine love that infuses creation—a topic far outside the juridical curriculum of the madrasas (especially nowadays), though it was much discussed in Sufism and philosophy. Thoroughly integrated with the



Landscapes After Old Masters, Shen Shichong, 1619

Qur'an and the hadith, Sam^ʿānī's book presents a compendium of religious lore and spiritual advice in captivating prose, much more similar in style to the *Mathnawī* of Rūmī (d. 1273) than to any of the many previous books on the divine names.

In explaining each name, Sam^ʿānī followed a standard list of ninety-nine going back to the Prophet's companion Abū Hurayrah. In each case, he offers a brief linguistic analysis, then goes into detail about the name's implications for living in the presence of God. Among the many theological topics he integrates into his narrative is the contrast between the two sorts of divine speech. He calls the creative command "the decree" (*ḥukm*) and the religious command "the command" (*amr*). He describes the human situation as one in which people—"these hapless ones" in the following paragraph—are pulled back and forth by the differing requirements of the two commands. Notice that he also refers to the contrasting calls of beauty and majesty:

This is a rare business. He brought these hapless ones into existence from *feeble water* [Qur'an 77:20] and *molded mud* [15:26]—the weak from the weak, dust from dust, the bewildered from the bewildered, the incapable from the incapable, the indigent from the indigent. Then He took them by the collar and placed them without hope in the battlefield of the brave—a battlefield in which the command pulls in one direction and the decree in another. The beauty of the Threshold calls out, "O friend, pass over My road," and from the pavilion of exaltedness the beginningless

majesty addresses them: "Hapless ones—beware, beware!"⁶

Sam^ʿānī frequently expands on the nature of human haplessness—that is, the unreality of the human situation when gauged against the Real. Unlike most theologians, he often lets on that he has a sense of humor. Take this passage, which begins by referring to the covenant of "Am I not your Lord?" This is the Qur'anic teaching that before God sent Adam's children into the world, He asked them to acknowledge Him as their Lord, and they did so.

He made everyone drunk with the wine of *Am I not your Lord?* [7:172]. He created ups and downs for this world and watered them with commands and prohibitions. He sent the drunkards into the world of ups and downs and set forth His will—"Clap your hands!"—and no one had the gall to say a thing.

You take me to the well's edge and place Your hands.

You say, "Refuge in God!" and then You push!

Yes, the perils in the road are like this, the man is drunk, there are ups and downs, and then the address comes, "Go straight to Him, and ask forgiveness of Him" [41:6]: Hey drunkard, walk straight!

There is a lame gnat, missing a wing, a leg, and an eye, with the other eye shut. They throw it into an ocean of fire, or an ocean of water, and then they send out the address, "Hey, don't burn your wing, don't get wet!"

The king said to me, "Drink wine, but don't get drunk!"

O king, everyone who drinks wine gets drunk.⁷

For Sam‘ānī, human haplessness is the fruit of God’s love and mercy. It provides people with the excuse they will need when they face God’s “rightful due” (again, the word ḥaqq). They were commanded to go straight, but no one really does so, not in a manner worthy of the Real. Fortunately, the divine decree, an expression of God’s infinite creative mercy and love, will have the final say:

There is a decree, a rightful due, and a command. Whenever you take something to the assayer of the decree, it comes out genuine; whenever you take something to the assayer of the rightful due, it comes out counterfeit; and whenever you take something to the assayer of the command, some of it comes out genuine and some counterfeit. You should constantly say in supplication, “Lord God, do not send our deeds to the assayer of the command or the rightful due! Send them to the assayer of the decree!”

The decree accepts everything, the rightful due rejects everything, and the command accepts some and rejects some. The decree is sheer bounty, the rightful due is sheer justice, and the command is bounty in one respect and justice in another. If you send the deeds of the one hundred twenty-some thousand pearls of sinlessness [i.e., the prophets] to the assayer of the rightful due, they will come out counterfeit. If you send the deeds of the tavern-goers to the assayer of the decree, you should know that it will be the opposite of that.⁸

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Given the omnipresence of the divine speech, why do some people claim that God keeps His mouth shut? The question can be answered from many directions, most of them having to do with human

perception. One common answer is simply “preparedness” (isti‘dād), which is a person’s individual make-up determined by the creative command. As the great Sufi teacher Junayd (d. 910) put it, “The water takes on the color of the cup.” Rūmī makes the same point in the verse,

If you pour the ocean into a pot,
how much will it hold? One day’s store.⁹

Our pots are endlessly diverse. In His infinite bounteousness, God has no need to repeat Himself, so each individual human is a unique pot, receptive toward the ocean in its own measure. Our pots are made of “clay,” but they have the plasticity to expand or contract, so free will has a role to play in the way pots change. The religious command addresses free will, and the creative command determines the pot.

The superabundance of God’s light prevents people from seeing Him, just as the superabundance of His speech prevents them from hearing Him.

Moment by moment, the eternal “Be!” bestows new being on each pot, so pots never preserve exactly the same shape for two successive moments. They change constantly, to some degree because of their own free choice. Both nature and nurture, in other words, play significant roles in their capacity to perceive the divine speech.

One factor that prevents people from hearing the omnipresent divine speech is its deafening din, though this argument typically goes on in terms of light (nūr). This divine name (nūr) signifies that there is no light but God, who is “the light of the heavens and the earth” (Qur’an 24:35). Like speech, light expresses meaning. Or

rather, it makes it possible for us to perceive both form and meaning. Ibn ʿArabī explains:

Were it not for light, nothing whatsoever would be perceived, neither object of knowledge, nor sensory object, nor imagined object. The names of light are diverse in keeping with the names set down for the faculties. The common people see these as names of the faculties, but those who recognize things see them as names of the light through which perception takes place. When you perceive sounds, you call that light “hearing.” When you perceive sights, you call that light “seeing.” When you perceive objects of touch, you call that light “touch.” So also is the case with objects of imagination. Hence the faculty of touch is nothing but light. Smell, taste, imagination, memory, reason, reflection, conceptualization, and everything through which perception takes place are nothing but light. As for the objects of perception, if they did not have the preparedness to accept the perception of the one who perceives them, they would not be perceived. Hence they first possess manifestation to the perceiver, then they are perceived. Manifestation is light.¹⁰

Though perception depends upon light, too much light blinds it. The superabundance of God’s light prevents people from seeing Him, just as the superabundance of His speech prevents them from hearing Him. The paradox of the divine light that bestows both sight and blindness is often expressed as a prayer. For example, al-Ghazālī: “Glory be to Him who is hidden from creatures through the intensity of His manifestation and veiled from them because of the radiance of His light!”¹¹

Ibn ʿArabī: “Glory be to Him who is hidden in His manifestation and manifest in His hiddenness!”¹² The great philosopher Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640): “Glory be to Him who hides His light from the insights of the creatures and veils His face from them with the intensity of His manifestation!”¹³

Samʿānī often discusses Moses’s encounter with God at Mount Sinai. Moses asked God for vision, but God denied it and “disclosed Himself to the mountain and made it crumble to dust” (Qur’an 7:143). His point in the following passage is that both seeing and hearing go back to individual capacity. He goes on to suggest why the reality of the Real does not let everyone complain of silence. The italicized sentences are in Arabic; the last is a saying of the Prophet.

Know that in reality He spoke to Moses in respect of Moses. Had He spoken to Moses in respect of His tremendousness, Moses would have melted. When He spoke to Moses, He spoke in the shade of His gentleness. If He had spoken to him in the attribute of tremendousness, he would have melted at the first step such that no name or mark of him would have remained.

What a marvelous business! Mount Sinai received the self-disclosure and crumbled. Hearts receive the self-disclosure and at every moment increase in agitation, revelry, and renewal. Yes, when Mount Sinai became the locus of the gaze, it came back to itself and did not have the capacity to put up with it. When hearts become the locus of the gaze, they do not become so through themselves. They become so through His attribute: “The hearts are between two fingers of the All-Merciful.”¹⁴



Endnotes

- 1 Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of The Healing*, trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 38. [The translation given here is my own.]
- 2 Abū Hāmid Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, ed. Fadlou Shehadi (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1971), 137.
- 3 Ibn ʿArabī, *Al-Futūḥāt Al-makkiyyah* (Cairo: 1911), 1:747.8.
- 4 Ibn ʿArabī, *Al-Futūḥāt*, 1:436.17.
- 5 Ibn ʿArabī, *Al-Futūḥāt*, 3:218.31.
- 6 Aḥmad Samʿānī, *The Repose of the Spirits: A Sufi Commentary on the Divine Names*, trans. William C. Chittick (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2019), 34.
- 7 Samʿānī, *The Repose*, 389.
- 8 Samʿānī, *The Repose*, 38–39.
- 9 R. A. Nicholson, ed. *The Mathnawī of Jalalu'ddin Rumi* (London: Luzac, 1925), 1:20.
- 10 Ibn ʿArabī, *Al-Futūḥāt*, 3:276.32, translated in William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 214.
- 11 Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Lights*, trans. and ed. David Buchman (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1998), 24.
- 12 Ibn ʿArabī, *Al-Futūḥāt*, 3:304.6.
- 13 Al-Wāridāt al-qalbiyyah, ed. Aḥmad Shafī'ihā, *Majmūʿa-yi rasā'il-i falsafī* (SIPRI, 2011), 3:335.
- 14 Samʿānī, *The Repose*, 332.

