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SILENCE AS A CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE AND PRACTICE

Abstract: Silence often plays a significant role in Christian experience and practice. However, the varieties of silence and the effects of silence for good and bad merit examination. It is important to distinguish between physical, auditory, and metaphorical silence, and between experiencing silence as “quiet” and experiencing silence as “keeping quiet”. Silence can be an instrumental good as well as an expressive good, a concomitant good, or a constitutive good. Christian monks, theologians, and other thinkers sometimes identify experiences of silence, for example, as light or dark, as spatially vast or enclosed, and as temporal or atemporal. Practices of silence can bring persons closer to God, though a kenotic spirituality of silence and a stress on solitude create perils for some members of religious orders, such as Carthusians. The chief aim of this article is to show, with philosophical techniques, how silence can be good in manifold ways and even, perhaps, an ideal.

Key Words: Carthusians, communication, David Hume, Martin Laird, Thomas Merton, monks, mystical darkness, silence, solitude

Silence, as both an experience and a practice, is a theme in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.¹ It has long been a practice in the Eastern Church and Roman Catholicism, but is generally less notable and sometimes discouraged in Protestantism.² Monks and cloistered nuns have rules pertaining to silence. Some laypersons attend silent retreats and are silent when praying. Some liturgies make room for periods of silence. Of course, there is much to be said against

1. Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History*, New York, Viking 2013, pp. 11-50.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 53-160.

silence. Silence and its practice are bad or undesirable if they lead, for example, to emotional paralysis or withdrawal from good human relationships. They are also bad or undesirable if they conceal wrongdoing, facilitate deceit, express abiding deep-seated anger, or function as a gendered weapon (e.g. a rule that only men may talk). Also bad or undesirable is remaining silent out of a desire to wound another person by withholding communication. Yet if one thinks deeply about silence, one can see there is much to say in its behalf.

1. SOUNDS, NOISE, AND SILENCE

To think about silence one should first think about sound. The word *sound* usually covers two different phenomena worth clarifying here. Physical sounds are longitudinal waves in an elastic medium such as air or water. Physical sounds are objective in that they can exist without anyone hearing them. Auditory sounds, which are subjective in that they require a hearer, are sensations created by physical sounds as they strike the eardrum and related structures of the ear and as the brain interprets these waves.

For present purposes, we need describe only some differences in auditory sounds but need not determine whether these sounds are objects, properties, or events.³ For example, auditory sounds differ in pitch, timbre, and intensity (loudness). The differences help to explain why we find some auditory sounds, like a breeze flowing through a grove of trees, soothing or pleasant, but other sounds, such as fingernails scraping a chalkboard, as grating or unpleasant. Noise is auditory sound that a hearer considers harsh, discordant, or excessively loud.

Even more important to understanding Christian experiences and practices of silence than auditory sounds are the varieties of auditory silence. Auditory silence includes the absence of auditory sound, the absence of unintentionally-caused auditory sound, the absence of intentionally-caused auditory sound (*quiet*), and the act of intentionally refraining from making an intentional auditory sound (*keeping quiet*). Of these, it is quiet and keeping quiet that are central to this study.⁴ Both depend on human intentions, but the role of intention differs. In quiet, by definition no intentionally-caused human sound exists in a

3. For an excellent discussion of these and other issues pertaining to auditory sounds, see Casey O'CALLAGHAN, *Sounds: A Philosophical Theory*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2007.

4. For the latter, some might prefer *keeping silence* on the ground that keeping quiet could suggest that a person is trying to avoid detection or commitment rather than pursuing a spiritual practice.

particular place, however it comes about that there is no such sound. In keeping quiet a person acts intentionally, perhaps with some effort, to abstain from making an intentional sound. There is a difference in scope between quiet and keeping quiet. Quiet exists if it is not the case that I have an intention to cause auditory sound. Here the negation has wide scope, and signals that there is no intention. Keeping quiet exists if I have an intention not to cause an auditory sound. Here the intention has wide scope, and signals that there is an intention not to do something – namely, to cause an auditory sound.

Quiet and keeping quiet are related to each other in many ways. For instance, if I and other people around me successfully keep quiet, then together we create quiet. In contrast, even if someone hears intentionally-caused human sounds, but has formidable powers of concentration, she may be able to keep quiet so that she can concentrate on something else. This article does not chase down every relation between quiet and keeping quiet. Quiet is intimately but not exclusively connected with experiences of silence, while keeping quiet is intimately but not exclusively connected with practices of silence.

Some philosophers think that there is such a thing as hearing silence, but this thinking seems confused. Roy Sorensen, for example, maintains that though auditory silence is the absence of sound, we can nevertheless hear silence.⁵ I respond: if there is an absence of auditory sound, we hear nothing. If a patient is listening intently in an audiologist's booth, and if in a particular interval there is no auditory sound, then the patient hears nothing. There is not some thing called silence that he hears. The difference between Sorensen and me may lie in this: I consider auditory silence to be a negation, whereas he seems to consider it a privation.

What I call metaphorical sound differs markedly from physical sound and auditory sound, but it is importantly related to Christian experiences and practices of silence. Metaphorical sound consists of thoughts, concerns, worries, memories, images, inner turmoil, or the "sounds" one "hears" with one's "mind's ear". Metaphorical sounds in this sense can be pleasant, entertaining, or soothing. But they can also be unpleasant, frightening, assaultive, or disruptive, in which case they are metaphorical noise. Metaphorical silence is the absence of metaphorical noise and sometimes even the absence of pleasant metaphorical sounds. The presence of metaphorical noise can fill the mind with

5. Roy Sorensen, «Hearing Silence: The Perception and Introspection of Absences», in Matthew Nudds and Casey O'CALLAGHAN, *Sounds and Perception: New Philosophical Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 126-45.

chaos and inner turbulence. Its presence can inhibit or prevent a person from being still and at peace. Even healthy pleasant metaphorical sounds, such as "listening" to a Bach partita in a person's mind, might lead this person away from contemplating God or "listening" for God's "voice". The partita is so spirited and captivating that it might get in the way of something even better. Thus, the significance of metaphorical silence is that it lays to rest not just metaphorical noise, but even on occasion pleasant metaphorical sounds and their power over a person's ability to concentrate, pray, meditate, and gain self-knowledge.

The foregoing rough account of metaphorical sound, noise, and silence does not overemphasize visual experience as it relates to sound. To be sure, metaphorical sound includes images, and some memories are visual. Also, auditory experience often includes direction: a source of sound is often perceived as above or below me, behind or in front of me, on my right or on my left. And from perceiving the direction and identifying the nature of a sound source, such as a train moving north, I can have a start on learning its location and course. I may judge the train to be near or far and moving toward or away from me. P. F. Strawson claims that there is no purely auditory concept of space.⁶ But he does not deny that there are contingent connections between sounds and locations. There are, I think, some analogies and some disanalogies between auditory and metaphorical sound. Even if Strawson's claim is correct, one possible disanalogy between auditory sound and metaphorical sound is that the latter might lack even contingent spatial relations.

In any case, perhaps most metaphorical sounds are nonspatial: thoughts, concerns, and worries typically lack spatial direction and location. Silently humming a symphony in my mind and remembering a person's voice are nonspatial. And some metaphorical noise, such as sticky music ("earworms"), is nonspatial. The Beatles' "Penny Lane" is a fine tune, but I do not want it playing repeatedly in my head for thirty minutes. Like other earworms and forms of metaphorical noise, it can interfere with concentration and inner calm. Unless we can replace metaphorical noise with metaphorical silence on occasion, it can be hard to develop a successful practice of meditation or quiet prayer.

This study explores the happier side of metaphorical silence, auditory silence as quiet, and auditory silence as keeping quiet in the Christian tradition. It is partly an essay in the phenomenology of one class of religious experiences: I offer a philosophical taxonomy of silence

6. P. F. STRAWSON, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Methuen, 1959), ch. 2.

and investigate Christian experiences of silence, including the perils of silence and its relation to talk. Here I disagree with both those who denigrate all religious practices of silence and those who think such practices a necessary component of Christian life.

David Hume, for example, is a denigrator. He indicts silence along with other "monkish virtues" such as fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, and solitude in these words:

the whole train of monkish virtues ... serve to no manner of purpose; neither advance a man's fortune in the world, nor render him a more valuable member of society; neither qualify him for the entertainment of company, nor increase his power of self-enjoyment ... [Rather] they cross all these desirable ends; stupify the understanding and harden the heart, obscure the fancy and sour the temper. We justly, therefore, transfer [these supposed virtues] to the opposite column, and place them in the catalogue of vices.⁷

Yet Hume overlooks, I shall argue, ways in which silence can conduce to a good life in which one is also helpful to others.

In contrast, Martin Laird writes: "Silence is an urgent necessity for us; silence is necessary if we are to hear God speaking in eternal silence; our own silence is necessary if God is to hear us".⁸ Laird is apparently referring, at least in part, to what I call quiet and keeping quiet. He does not explicitly distinguish, as I do, between auditory silence and metaphorical silence. I perceive him to be concerned almost entirely with metaphorical silence. On occasion, though, he has in mind auditory sounds or noise that disrupts auditory silence.⁹ Insofar as Laird or others point to auditory silence, it is important to examine that sort of silence in relation to the three independent clauses of the sentence I quoted at the beginning of this paragraph. First, auditory silence does not seem to be necessary, let alone an urgent necessity. The opposite of auditory silence need not be unbearable noise or a loud din. Its opposite is the absence of auditory noise. And quiet is the opposite of any intentionally-caused noise, which could be a faint, melodious or soothing sound, such as humming a lullaby for a brief while. It does not seem to be a necessity to be rid of the lullaby forever.

7. David HUME, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* [1751], sec. IX, part I, 2nd ed. L. A. SELBY-BIGGE (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), p. 270.

8. Martin LAIRD, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 2. Some examination of "in eternal silence" is in this section and some comes later. I find his book helpful and hope not to seem ungrateful by expressing reservations about parts of it.

9. "For example, we are trying to sit in silence with our prayer word, and the people next door start blasting their music". *Ibid.*, p. 78.

The second clause appears to be false if we restrict attention to auditory silence. But Christianity does not hold that God is eternally silent, or at any rate that God must be eternally silent. Though in the Hebrew Bible God may show displeasure with the Israelites by silent withdrawal, eventually God starts talking again.¹⁰ Neither are the people God created eternally silent. So let us drop "in eternal silence" for the moment. Once dropped, the rest of the second clause seems to be false. Even if God is not omnipotent, God is certainly very powerful – and surely powerful enough to break through any auditory sounds people are hearing.

The third clause appears to be false or confused or both. To the extent that God has anything that resembles human hearing, presumably God's hearing would be quite acute. Even if human beings were utterly silent, God would know what is on their minds. Moreover, the third clause supposes that human silence is indispensable to God's hearing us, whereas if God is to "hear" us we must be making some auditory sound, whether faint or loud – unless, of course, God knows our unvoiced thoughts, which would make our silence irrelevant. The third clause, and indeed the entire sentence, seems confused if one has in mind auditory silence.

In most passages, however, Laird is concerned with what I call metaphorical silence and metaphorical noise.¹¹ Once these passages are front and center, the sentence quoted earlier makes a good deal more sense. To be sure, the second clause seems unhelpful, for God does have the power to break through the metaphorical noise of our minds. The third clause also seems unhelpful, because God could presumably break through any metaphorical noise in our heads and "hear" us just fine. Nevertheless metaphorical silence – inner calm or interior silence – is needed at least from time to time in order to collect our thoughts and develop a stable sense of self. Furthermore, metaphorical silence is ordinarily needed for us to "listen" to God, whether we become metaphorically silent on our own or God extinguishes any metaphorical noise in our heads. In these ways Laird enriches our understanding of metaphorical silence and metaphorical noise.

I will not belabor Hume's denigration of silence or Laird's praise of it. However, their thoughts suggest that, in understanding silence, we should be open to differentiating philosophically various kinds of si-

10. MacCulloch, *Silence*, pp. 11-29.

11. See, for example, Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, pp. 4-5 ("inner silence," "interior silence," "inner noise," "the inner chaos going on in our heads"), p. 22 ("the chaos of the mind"), p. 90 ("inner calm," "afflictive thoughts," and "psychodramas"), p. 140 ("inner chatter").

lence beyond the simple distinction between physical, auditory, and metaphorical silence and the further distinction between quiet and keeping quiet. It is to the task of classifying silence in additional ways that I now turn.

2. A. TAXONOMY

To understand auditory silence as quiet, first notice that it is not the same as solitude, solitariness, a refusal to engage with others, or an absence of noise caused by animals or natural phenomena such as thunderstorms. Sometimes quiet can overlap with or accompany these other things but it is not identical with them. I am concerned chiefly with ways in which silence might be good. Only in Section 5 do I address the conjunction of silence and solitude.

Goods can be either intrinsic or nonintrinsic. As understood here, an intrinsic good is good in itself; it rarely derives its goodness from any other good. Nonintrinsic goods are almost always derivative; their goodness comes from some other good. Although the boundary between intrinsic and nonintrinsic goods is sometimes uncertain, the concept of a nonintrinsic good depends on understanding the concept of an intrinsic good. It is questionable whether silence is good in itself. The answer depends partly on whether one is talking about auditory or metaphorical silence, or silence as quiet or as keeping quiet.

The taxonomy of silence developed here intersects with the distinction between intrinsic and nonintrinsic goods. It recognizes instrumental goods (a class of nonintrinsic goods), as well as what I call expressive, weakly constitutive, strongly constitutive, and concomitant goods.

Instrumental goods serve some end or other. Sometimes auditory silence is an instrumental good. For instance, if noise resulting from human activity makes it hard to think clearly, then silence as quiet would be instrumentally good insofar as it promotes clear thinking. Intrinsic goods, in contrast, need not serve some end; yet if they do, their goodness does not derive from serving that end. For example, auditory or metaphorical silence as quiet that aids clear thinking about how to organize one's day is instrumentally good for that limited end. If anything counts as clear thinking about God, then silence as quiet that aids such clear thinking may be intrinsically good but is also good for an intrinsically good end.

Expressive goods are activities or states that display or reveal something that is intrinsically or nonintrinsically good. For instance,

running a marathon expresses the good of physical fitness. Similarly, keeping quiet while meditating on how to be a better person expresses the good of controlling one's self and surroundings to further a good end. One's self-control, in turn, is an instrumental good that arguably advances the intrinsic good of being a better person. Differently, think of sad, childless Hannah praying inaudibly to God. Inaptly, Eli remonstrates her for being drunk. She replies that she has had no wine or strong drink: "I am a woman in great trouble ... I am pouring out my soul before Yahweh ... all this time I have been speaking from the depth of my grief and my resentment". 1 Sam. 1:15-16 (NJB) Hannah's unburdening her sadness to God is expressively good because it displays a healthy recognition of her dependence on God.

A weak constitutive good is an integral part of some larger good but is not itself intrinsically good. An example comes from one sort of meditation. Francis de Sales (1567-1622), in considering what seems to be keeping quiet in meditation, sees meditation as an activity. It is "simply attentive thought voluntarily repeated or entertained in the mind in order to arouse the will to holy and salutary affections and resolutions".¹² This passage does not suggest that silent attentive thinking is intrinsically good. Instead, this thinking is a smaller part of an activity that prompts the will to seek both instrumental and intrinsic goods.

A strong constitutive good is an integral part of some larger intrinsic good and is itself intrinsically good. To illustrate, justice is good in itself and is part of a larger good, namely a good society. It is difficult to isolate a sort of silence or a practice of silence that satisfies this definition of a strong constitutive good. A possible example is a period of silence as quiet during a worship service. If the quiet stems from awe of God's goodness in a community of like-minded persons, then the quiet might be both good in itself and part of a larger intrinsic good, namely a communal liturgy of worship that is also good in itself.

Lastly, there is a concomitant good. It travels along with an intrinsic good, like a bird perched on a moving wagon, but does not produce, express, or constitute (weakly or strongly) the intrinsic good. Isaac of Nineveh (d. c. 700) paints a picture of silence as a concomitant good:

What is the most precious and the principal characteristic in pure prayer is the brevity and smallness of any stirrings, and the fact that the mind simply gazes as though in wonder during this diminution of active prayer. From this, one of two things occurs to the mind in connection

12. FRANCIS DE SALES, *Treatise on the Love of God* [1616], bk. 6, ch. 1, trans. John K. RYAN (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Image Books, 1963), vol. 1, 272.

with that brief stirring which wells up in it: either it withdraws into silence, as a result of the overpowering might of the knowledge which the intellect has received in a particular verse; or it is held in delight at that point at which it was aiming during the prayer when it was stirred, and the heart cultivates it with an insatiable yearning of love. These are the principle characteristics of pure prayer.¹³

My concern here is solely with the silence alternative rather than the delight alternative. Assume that pure prayer as Isaac describes it is intrinsically good. He does not say that silence as either quiet or keeping quiet produces, expresses, or constitutes pure prayer. He does say that the mind retreats into silence, apparently of both sorts, as a result of new knowledge. This case is one in which an intrinsic good carries with it a simultaneous nonintrinsic good. Silence as quiet or keeping quiet is concurrent with reflection on that knowledge in prayer or meditation.

My classification defends silence of each sort – auditory and metaphorical, quiet and keeping quiet – against some of Hume’s objections. He would protest that some of the goods mentioned involve prayer and the existence of God, and that his works on religion at least throw into doubt God’s existence and the defensibility of prayer.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the taxonomy serves its purpose by laying the groundwork for thinking about experiences of silence. Silence can be good in each of the ways delineated in this section. It is a mistake to denigrate silence as Hume does.

3. EXPERIENCING SILENCE

What might religious experiences of silence, examined using philosophical techniques, be like? I use the term *religious experience* in a broad way to cover mystical experiences, experiences of a religiously significant reality, and associated feelings of, say, happiness or communion with God in a religious context of prayer or meditation.¹⁵

13. ISAAC OF NINEVEH, “Centuries on Knowledge IV.66”, in Sebastian BROCK intro. and trans., *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987), pp. 268-69.

14. David HUME, «The Natural History of Religion [1757]», in *A Dissertation on the Passions; The Natural History of Religion: A Critical Edition*, ed. Tom L. BEAUCHAMP (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007); David HUME, *Dialogue on Natural Religion and Other Essays [1773]*, ed. Dorothy COLEMAN (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

15. This use is roughly the same as that of Mark WEBB, «Religious Experience», in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Edward N. Zalta ed. Winter 2017), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/religious-experience> (revised 13 December 2017).

My question concerns mainly silence as quiet rather than keeping quiet. The passages quoted from Francis de Sales and Isaac of Nineveh merely hint at an answer, because they focus on meditation and prayer rather than the experience of silence itself. Some of Laird's thoughts are helpful. He has many excellent practical suggestions for those who want to become silent for religious reasons: make as little sound as possible; do not move around or fidget; monitor your posture and breathing; use a prayer word; heighten your awareness; wait for God to move you or communicate with you as God wills.¹⁶

In regard to experiences of silence, Laird stresses what might be called the spatialization of silence. There are, he writes, mutual silences in "the silent land", which is "uncharted" and has no "definitive map".¹⁷ This land, he says, is vast, open, and light.¹⁸ It has a "depthless depth", which is partly spatial in that it suggests downward movement or direction, even if the phrase seems to be a contradiction in terms.¹⁹ He quotes various religious writers who characterize some experiences of silence as spatial.

Although silence as both quiet and keeping quiet can have this characteristic, it need not do so, and the particular spatial terms Laird uses do not exhaust possible experiences of silence. Senses other than hearing and vision – such as touch, smell, and proprioception – can be part of religious experiences that accompany a practice of silence. A quiet person's hands can touch each other while she keeps quiet. She can smell odors, such as incense or flowers. She can sense the position of her body, such as sitting up, lying down, or being inverted in a yoga pose. These and other states can be simultaneous and are often independent of silence, even though they attend a practice of silence. These other senses can also accompany vision and spatial perceptions. A lack of spatial information in silence can make for an experience of emptiness and uncertainty of location that pertains to apophatic states of awareness.²⁰

Experiences of silence also need not involve a sense of vastness and being filled with light. The Hebrew Bible has images of God's wings, and the wings of an angel of God, as sheltering us. Psalm 63:7 says that in the shadow of your [God's] wings I rejoice". (NJB) Psalm 91:4 says

16. LAIRD, *Into the Silent Land*, pp. 31-45.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 3.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 67, 142.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

20. The deliverances of the senses are ordinarily instrumental, expressive, or concomitant goods associated with silence. On occasion silence-associated goods are weakly constitutive. For instance, a peaceful life, even if it is not intrinsically good, could be an integral part of a larger good of a life devoted to loving God in silence.

that God “covers you with his pinions, you find shelter under his wings” and adds, “His constancy is shield and protection”. (NJB) An experience of being beneath divine or angelic wings could involve an experience of silence and security marked by a narrow space, and maybe only the glimpse of a wedge of space beyond the wings. Psalm 27:5 says that God “folds me in the recesses of his tent [*sukkah*],” where the word “tent” could refer to a physical tent or be a metaphor for the temple in Jerusalem. Much later, in Luke 13:34, Jesus expresses a longing to gather the children of Jerusalem “as a hen gathers her brood under her wings”. (NJB) Some persons close their eyes in silent prayer. Their sense of space may be imagined if it exists at all. Imagined space could be small, dark, or breezeless.

I offer two comments on the phenomenology of religious experiences of silence that are small or dark or both. First, though views from a mountaintop may be invigorating for many persons, some prefer small, snug spaces with little or no view. Many creatures, not just humans, desire such spaces. Den animals like dogs and burrowing animals like rabbits are examples. Some young children, and even some adults, like being completely underneath blankets or tables. Some human beings enjoy tiny, confined spaces because of a sense of protection and security, and a proper subset of these persons seek silence as quiet in such places. Indeed, Carthusian monks, whom I discuss later, practice and experience silence encased, in a way, within their cells.

Second, silence as quiet is sometimes connected with darkness rather than light. The Christian tradition includes some theologians and other thinkers who emphasize a mysticism of darkness. This tradition may have its origins in a mix of Plato’s allegory of the Cave and Moses’ finding darkness at the top of Mount Sinai.²¹ Early theologians associated with this emphasis include Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335 – c. 395) and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (dates disputed).²² The terms commonly given to this perspective are “divine darkness”, “dazzling darkness”, and “luminous darkness”. Perhaps these terms seem obscure if not internally inconsistent. But the basic idea is apophatic: even if one escapes the metaphorical darkness of sin, and in turn gains some knowledge, eventually one confronts an inability to know God

21. PLATO, Republic bk. 7; Exod. 19:16-25; Denys TURNER, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 11-18.

22. GREGORY OF NYSSA, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. MALHERBE and Everett FERGUSON (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978); PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS, *The Life of Moses*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm LUIBHEID (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987). For useful commentary, see Henri-Charles PUECH, «La Ténèbre mystique chez le Pseudo-Denys l’Aréopagite et dans la Tradition Patristique», in his *En Quête de la Gnose* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), vol. 1, pp. 119-141.

and to say much about God that is meaningful. Thomas Merton often connects silence, contemplation, darkness, and apophaticism.²³

Perhaps the best-known poetic expression of this mystical darkness is the final stanza of "The Night" by Henry Vaughan (1621-1695):

There is in God (some say)
A deep, but dazzling [sic] darkness; As men here
Say it is late and dusky; because they
See not all clear;
O for that night! Where I in him
Might live invisible and dim.²⁴

Connections between an experience of silence as quiet and a mysticism of darkness are difficult to articulate. Vaughan does not say that the dazzling darkness he refers to is part of his personal experience. The parenthetical qualification – "some say" – reveals his caution. The darkness to which Vaughan refers is neither the dark night of the soul nor carnal darkness nor the darkness of sin and ignorance. Rather, Vaughan's dark night seems to be "a withdrawal of the soul from the things of the earth by a great desire and longing to love and see and experience Jesus and spiritual things".²⁵ A difficult issue is whether anyone who has had this sort of personal experience can clarify it. If it is an experience of something, it is hard to know whether two persons who claim to have had such an experience could settle a dispute about what the experience is like. Some sense of dazzling darkness might not be an experience of anything. But if this is so, this sense seems more like a state of consciousness whose content is elusive. Moreover, it is partly an empirical issue whether all who claim to have been in such a state would supply the same descriptions of it. There are also linguistic and historical issues in understanding apophatic mysticism.²⁶

By no means do all devotees of a mysticism of darkness practice keeping quiet for religious reasons. Still, the phenomenology of reli-

23. See John F. TEAHAN, «A Dark and Empty Way: Thomas Merton and the Apophatic Tradition», *Journal of Religion*, 58 (1978), pp. 263-287. In partial contrast, Martin Laird in «Gregory of Nyssa and the Mysticism of Darkness: A Reconsideration» *Journal of Religion*, 79 (1999), pp. 592-616, argues that Gregory's works also reveal a mysticism of light. LAIRD, *Into the Silent Land*, pp. 68-70, emphasizes "luminous vastness" over "luminous darkness".

24. From Henry VAUGHAN, «Silex Scintillans [1650, 1655]», in Leonard Cyril MARTIN, ed., *The Works of Henry Vaughan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2nd ed. 1957), pp. 522-523. R. A. DURR, «Vaughan's 'The Night'», *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 59 (1960), pp. 34-40, associates dazzling darkness in Vaughan's poem mainly with the Christian tradition and Pseudo-Dionysius.

25. R. A. DURR, *On the Mystical Poetry of Henry Vaughan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), pp. 113, 171 (quoting Walter HILTON).

26. Compare TURNER, *The Darkness of God*, with Bernard MCGINN's review in the *Journal of Religion*, 77 (1997), pp. 309-11.

gious experiences of silence can be joined to distinctly mystical views of God. Dazzling darkness is a part of a few, but hardly all, religious experiences of silence as quiet, or at least is part of associated states of consciousness.

From space and nocturnal mysticism I move to time. Experiences of silence can also be temporal or atemporal without being spatial. An experience of silence is temporal if the silent person (whether intentionally or nonintentionally silent) is aware of the passing of time through, say, the hands on a clock, the continuously shifting sunlight coming through a window, or a growing awareness of hunger.²⁷ An experience of silence is atemporal for present purposes if the intentionally-silent person is unaware of the passing of time. To illustrate, if one is oblivious to the burning down of a candle and insulated from both the usual rhythms of the day and all time-keeping devices, then one's experience could be atemporal in my sense. For most people, temporal experiences of silence are likely more common than atemporal experiences, but for some people it could be the opposite. A particular person might experience silence temporally on some occasions but atemporally on others.

Further, the distinction between atemporal and temporal experiences of silence, respectively, need not track the distinction between intrinsic and nonintrinsic goods associated with silence. Some practices of silent prayer may have periods in which the person praying is unaware of the passing of time. Yet the atemporal character of this experience may not make it intrinsically better than a corresponding experience in which the person praying is aware that time is passing.

By writing that we need inner silence (i.e. metaphorical silence) "if we are to hear God speak in eternal silence", Laird runs into further difficulties surrounding time and experiences of silence.²⁸ He uses "hear" and "speak" metaphorically, yet I do not think Laird means that God is simultaneously both remaining metaphorically silent and metaphorically speaking to us, though God might be silent for one person and speaking to a different person. Neither, I think, does he mean that across eternal time (eternal for both past and future in God's case and eternal for the future in the case of human beings) God is constantly speaking to us. Perhaps we are to understand the phrase "in eternal

27. I lay to one side, as not directly in point, the philosophical issue of whether the passage of time is unreal or illusory. Cf. Michael DUMMETT, "A Defense of McTaggart's Proof of the Unreality of Time", *Philosophical Review*, 69 (1960), pp. 497-504; Simon PROSSER, "Why Does Time Seem to Pass?", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 85 (2012), pp. 92-116.

28. LAIRD, *Into the Silent Land*, p. 2; see note 8 above.

silence" in this way: if God is outside time, and if a person is in metaphorically-silent union with God, then this person's experience could take her or him outside time and be in that sense eternal. This possible interpretation is metaphysically challenging, for it is unclear how we are to grasp a sense of the "eternal" that is outside of time for God but in time for us. A different, and much less metaphysically challenging, interpretation of "in eternal silence" is this: if a person is in metaphorically-silent union with God, then when God "speaks", the person finds any "words" "spoken" by God to be quite beyond the point. This last interpretation allows for a spiritual state, divorced from language and metaphorical sound, in which some experience of God occurs.

The foregoing observations matter because we can appreciate and benefit from our nonspatial, darkness-laden, and atemporal experiences of silence as quiet. If we were to concentrate solely on the spatial, we might be tempted to think that we are "not doing silence right" unless the experience of silence manifested itself as spatial and moreover as vast and light. Instead, our experiences of silence could also involve darkness, soothing touch, the smell of burning incense, and bodily sensations. These experiences could be temporal or atemporal as well. If the term *silence* "points to" anything, it need not point to the ineffable. For Francis de Sales, silent meditation is a process of attentive thought that excites the will in certain ways. For Isaac of Nineveh, silence is a concomitant outgrowth of pure prayer in which the intellect receives knowledge. It would be a step too far to say that Francis and Isaac are specifically interested, as I am, in how silence relates to a particular kind of intentionally-caused human sound, even if that relation can deepen our understanding of some kinds of silence.

4. DEEPER INTO SILENCE

We began with two sorts of silence: quiet and keeping quiet. We can deepen our understanding of both sorts by relating them to talk. In the philosophy of language, talk is usually oral communication. There are many other forms of communication: touch, writing, gestures, kissing, body language, smoke signals, and so on. Talk is important here because it involves intentionally-caused human sound. So far as the absence of talk is concerned, it is useful to distinguish between intermittent silence and silence before and after talking.²⁹

29. Bernard P. DAUENHAUER, *Silence: The Phenomenon and its Ontological Significance* (Blooming-

Intermittent silence exists in at least three different forms. One is the silence between most words that exists in all human languages. If talk lacked even the slightest pause between words, it would be much harder to understand what someone is saying. A second form is the silence between breaths that facilitates conversation and discussion. From an academic conference many years ago, I recall the following partly testy, partly amusing exchange involving two scholars, *A* and *B*. *A* spoke more rapidly than anyone I have listened to before or since:

A: (ending a long argument) "... and that disconfirms the hypothesis".

B: "It seems to me that ..."

A (interrupting): "I wasn't finished".

B (mock apology): "Sorry, I thought you were done. Most of us take a breath between paragraphs".

Almost no one has the lung capacity to talk without a breath for more than a minute. A third form of intermittent silence is cultural: in conversation there is some back-and-forth and thus some silence between the utterances of two or more speakers.

In all three forms, the existence of a short interval of silence makes talk intelligible, as well as better understood and respectful of participation by others. A healthy silence facilitates listening. Really listening to others is important because it respects other human beings whose thoughts and emotions may differ from ours. It also involves humility: when we really listen to others, we are stepping back from insisting on our own speech, and from attaching so much significance to what we say and think.

Silence before and after talking might initially seem the same as the last form of intermittent silence. But in my usage silence before and after talking can involve rather longer periods of silence than is common in conversation. Here the silence can be ended repeatedly, or the silence can continue indefinitely. Repeated periods of silence, which might last hours or days or even weeks, do not occur in typical conversations. Sometimes they happen because one person needs to attend to another task. Longer periods can happen among hermits who remain in silent solitude until they have a visitor. Episodic periods of silence can occur among Quakers because they are waiting for the Spirit's inspiration to speak. During a meeting, individuals practicing Quaker silent waiting are equals: no individual is privileged, on human merits, to speak to

ton: Indiana University Press, 1980), pp. 6-16, calls these "intervening silence" and "fore-and-after silence".

anyone else. From an outsider's perspective, Quaker silent worship and waiting are an expression of egalitarianism and the practical need to have a place where like-minded persons can be together. To Quakers, this silent ritual is quiet listening and sometimes a sense of awe.³⁰

Talk that ends in indefinite, and perhaps permanent, silence is interesting. Some cases are sad, such as deaf mutes or persons who have lost the ability to speak, but to some might not seem interesting from a philosophical point of view. However, it is quite interesting if people cease to speak because they believe it is pointless to say anything more. Indeed, a person who believes that God is ultimately incomprehensible should at some point remain silent, for if something is ineffable, it makes little sense for that person to try to say anything about it.³¹ Thomas Aquinas, in the last few months of his life, ceased to speak or write on theology, though the historical record is inadequate to explain why he fell silent. Quite differently, a person could stop speaking with someone out of anger and bitterness.³² This silence is not polite or prayerful; it is a wounding, antagonistic, or wintry silence. Here the decision to remain silent often issues from a desire to harm the other person by withholding communication. Acting on such a desire is morally problematic, but it is just one of many examples of how silence can lead to bad results. Silence, if practiced to its outer limits, presents various hazards, even in Christian practice.

5. PERILS OF PROFESSIONAL SILENCE AND SOLITUDE

The Carthusian Order, founded in 1084, has the most rigorous practices of silence and solitude in western monasticism. Its monks and cloistered nuns may experience the temporal and spatial characteristics of silence and solitude somewhat differently from the experiences had by most other monks, cloistered nuns, clergy or lay people. Indeed Carthusian experiences of time and space, and their life of silence and solitude, may create some perils for them.

30. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. HARVEY (London, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1923), pp. 210-214. More recently, see Rachel MUERS, *Keeping God's Silence: Towards a Theological Ethics of Communication* (Malden, MA, Oxford UK, and Carlton, Victoria, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

31. It could, however, be possible for a different individual who has greater cognitive and linguistic capacities than the person I am imagining to express things that this person cannot. Sebastian GÄB, «The Paradox of Ineffability», *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, 78 (2017), pp. 289-300.

32. Alain CORBIN, *A History of Silence: From the Renaissance to the Present Day* [2016], trans. Jean BRRELL (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018), pp. 96-107, explores both hate-filled silence and various silences of love in intimate relationships.

Philip Groening's film *Die grosse Stille*³³ gives the outside world a look into the Grande Chartreuse, the chief charterhouse of the Carthusian order located in the mountains near Grenoble. The film offers no commentary or musical score. The sacristan's bell signals the time according to the horarium, which varies somewhat across charterhouses, monks, seasons, and days of the week.³⁴ The following times are approximate. Monks rise and pray in cell at 11:30 p.m. Matins and Lauds begin around 12:15 a.m. in the chapel and last two or three hours, after which the monks sleep till around 6:30 a.m., with Prime at 7:00 a.m. followed by a conventual Mass in the chapel at 8:00 a.m. Terce is at 10:00 a.m. and Sext at 12 noon, with some opportunity during the morning for prayer, private Masses, lectio divina, and a period for study or work. Monks eat their midday meal in cell and have time for work and recreation until None at 2:00 p.m. and Vespers at 4:00 p.m. There is a light meal (collation) between Vespers and Compline, which begins at 6:45 p.m. After Compline the monks sleep from 7:30 or 8:00 p.m. until it is time to rise for Matins at 11:30 p.m. Monks consume most meals in cell, and silence prevails for communal meals on Sundays and holy days. The monks take a walk of several hours once a week, and they may talk with each other en route. Vatican II reforms narrow the gulf between choir monks and brothers, and increase the interaction between solemnly professed monks and other monks.

Carthusian monks internalize the horarium in a way that may affect their experience of time. They rarely have watches or clocks, so the bell tells them when they need to go to the next office or activity. Viewers of Groening's film may sense that "time is effectively softened and elongated" through "recurring rituals".³⁵ The monks themselves experience time in various ways: as recurring, as elapsing while chanting, as remembering the past, and as awareness of inner time-consciousness, for example. Some viewers of the film, and some monks, develop an "internal sense of time that silence points to" but they may "also begin to feel its opposite, a sense of timelessness".³⁶ These are echoes of earlier themes concerning the spatial, dark, temporal, and atemporal aspects of silence.

33. *Into Great Silence*, Zeitgeist Films, 2005.

34. <http://www.chartreux.org/en/monks/carthusian-day.php> (last accessed 3 November 2019). Carthusian nuns follow a similar protocol. The horarium sketched momentarily does not mention that the eight canonical offices (Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline) are preceded or followed by like-named offices devoted to Mary and usually observed in cell.

35. Henry SCHWARTZ, «Temporal Transformations in Cinema and Psychoanalysis: On Philip Groening's *Into Great Silence*», *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 90 (2009), pp. 909-915, especially pp. 909, 910.

36. *Ibid.*, 911.

Carthusian practice and Groening's film suggest at least two perspectives on monastic space in the cell. First, radiating outward from each monk's body in the innermost part of the cell (the *cubiculum*) – which consists of his bed, prie-dieu, table, chair, and a crucifix on a wall – is the rest of his cell (typically two to four rooms altogether), the charterhouse buildings, the wall around the charterhouse, the property boundary of the monastery as a whole, the earth, and the universe. Second, the rest of the universe surrounds the earth, which includes in turn the property boundary of the entire monastery, the wall around the charterhouse, its buildings, the monk's cell, its *cubiculum*, and the monk's body inside the *cubiculum*. As Nancy Maguire puts it, "Layers of concentric circles wrap the monk in solitude, enclose him, protect him from any awareness of secular life".³⁷ "No one can enter [the *cubiculum*] without the monk's permission", she continues, and "[a]t the center of these protective circles, the monk's own diligence and prayer protect his interior life".³⁸ Viewed in the second way, the monk is for a significant part of each day nested in a small, snug space that makes room for security in silence and solitude.³⁹

Earlier I distinguished silence from solitude. It is possible to have neither, both, or one without the other. To address possible perils of Carthusian life one should consider silence and solitude together. Carthusians are not hermits but combine anchoritic and coenobitic aspects of monastic life. Two Trappist monks who are performing a joint task, like chopping vegetables, can communicate, despite their silence, through hand signals. Two Carthusians performing the same task have no hand signals and may even stand well apart from each other as they work. The hoods of Carthusian monks are often up, i.e. pulled upward and forward so that it is not possible for a monk to communicate by nods or glances with adjacent monks. Above all, a great deal of the monks' time is spent in prayer and contemplation in cell. Few men have the temperament to endure and profit from such silence and solitude, season after season, and year after year. Perhaps for this reason those who remain in a charterhouse for many decades might seem to live a sublime life.⁴⁰ Here silence as quiet and keeping quiet along

37. Nancy Klein Maguire, *An Infinity of Little Hours: Five Young Men and Their Trial of Faith in the Western World's Most Austere Monastic Order* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2006), p. 26.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Peter Nissen, «Carthusian Worlds, Carthusian Images: The Fascination of Silence and Inaccessibility», *Studies in Spirituality*, 24 (2014), pp. 143-512, is an insightful study of these themes.

40. Robin Bruce Lockhart, *Halfway to Heaven: The Hidden Life of the Sublime Carthusians* (London: Thames Methuen, 1985).

with solitude are instrumental, expressive, concomitant, and weakly constitutive goods in a life devoted to God.

From recent sources in English, doubts have arisen about the sustainability and health of the Carthusian calling even among persons who might otherwise be a Benedictine or a Cistercian monk. Here are two examples, though sources in other languages and other countries might tell a different story. Maguire's study of five Carthusian novices who entered the English charterhouse at Parkminster in 1960-1961, only one of whom eventually became a solemnly professed monk who stayed there indefinitely, identifies perils that many of these men faced. They include psychological tensions, psychosomatic ailments, personal duels between past and present novice masters, disputes over who is really a Carthusian monk, and squabbles over choir performance. As to the last, it turns out that some monks can carry a tune and others cannot, and that some monks care about the quality of the choir and others do not.⁴¹

Father Benedict Kossmann's memoir of twenty years in Carthusian charterhouses in Spain and Vermont is more personal.⁴² For many years he loved the cell's silence and solitude.⁴³ Often he disliked monastic responsibilities such as serving as chanter or novice master. Sometimes he experienced frustration with the choir, chafed under his prior, and suffered from severe headaches that seemed to defy diagnosis. Eventually, he found "no enjoyment in anything", and a priest psychiatrist opined that "by remaining in the monastery [Kossmann] was destroying [his] personality".⁴⁴ But the Spanish charterhouse in which he began had inculcated a culture of nothingness. Despite his initial love of silence and solitude, Kossmann concluded that "[his] spirituality of nothingness was leading to a destruction or disappearance of [his] human personality".⁴⁵ In time, he found the cell to be emotionally and physically very difficult. He sought, and received permission, to be released from the Order and the priesthood.

However, neither Kossmann nor the five monks discussed in detail by Maguire regretted their years in a charterhouse. For Kossmann in the late stages of his time as a Carthusian, silence and solitude did not seem to be goods. The same appears true of some of the five monks on whom Maguire concentrates. Or, at least, in both cases the good fea-

41. MAGUIRE, *An Infinity of Little Hours*, passim.

42. Father Benedict KOSSMANN, *Sounds of Silence ... A Monk's Journey* (Bloomington, IN: Author-House, 2005). It is not clear to me whether the author's name is, at least in part, a pseudonym.

43. *Ibid.*, pp. 244-46.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 249, 251.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 251.

tures of silence and solitude appear to be mixed with adverse or destructive features. It is not clear whether either silence or solitude, or both together, cause bad results; or whether there is some more complicated function between silence, solitude, and each individual monk at a particular time and place that explains why Carthusian life did not ultimately work well for some of these men.

Yet one of the perils of silence and solitude may lie in kenotic spirituality: an emptying out of the monk's self. More precisely, silence and solitude contribute to a peril that ultimately derives from kenotic spirituality. The connection is contingent rather than necessary.

Kenosis means different things to different scholars and monks.⁴⁶ A prominent meaning is throwing out the "false self" while holding onto the "true self". Sustained prayer and contemplation can identify bits of falseness in the monk's self. Examples include egoism, self-assertion, and pride in what seems to him his spiritual progress. Once identified, these bits can be ground down and cast out from his make-up. To say that these things *can* happen is not to say that they *will* happen. Moreover, how is a monk to distinguish clearly and consistently between his false self and his true self? Even with the aid of a confessor or spiritual director, he may find it hard to do so. Again, a monk is scarcely immune to self-ignorance and self-deception. A meditation of Guigo I (1083-1136), the fifth Prior of the Grande Chartreuse, puts the matter starkly: "See how ignorant you are of your own self; there is no land so distant or so unknown to you, nor one about which you will so easily believe in falsehoods".⁴⁷

Merton, a Trappist whose spirituality is likely to resonate with that of some Carthusians, fluctuates in what he says about the false self and the true self.⁴⁸ Frequently he associates the false self with sin: "To say I was born in sin is to say I came into the world with a false self".⁴⁹ This view seems to rest on some version of original sin, which many Orthodox Christians reject, even if they allow that a person's own sins may lead to one kind of false self. Other kinds of false self issue from self-ignorance, or from faults that do not rise to the level of sin. As-

46. E.g., Marie BAIRD, «Toward a Kenotic Model of Spiritual Subjectivity», *Studies in Spirituality*, 26 (2016), pp. 45-58 (drawing on contemporary work by Emmanuel Levinas and Gianni Vattimo); Neil PEMBROKE, «Two Spiritualities of Self-Emptying: Weil's 'Decreation' and Merton's Emptying Out the False Self», *Studies in Spirituality*, 25 (2015), pp. 267-78 (preferring Thomas Merton's emptying of the false self to Simone Weil's destruction of the self).

47. *The Meditations of Guigo I, Prior of the Charterhouse*, trans. and intro. A. Gordon MURSELL (Kalamazoo, MI, and Spencer, MA, Cistercian Publications, 1995) (no. 303), p. 231. I use the translation in R. W. SOUTHERN, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), p. 231, which is more accurate than Mursell's.

48. See TEAHAN, «A Dark and Empty Way», note 23 above, especially pp. 270, 277-81, 283.

49. Thomas MERTON, *Seeds of Contemplation* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions Books, 1949), pp. 27.

tutely, Merton identifies still other kinds of false self: a shadow self that tricks us, and even a Promethean self that considers itself to be like a god. His works inventory many kinds of false self.

Merton's writings throw less light on the true self.⁵⁰ It does not suffice to say that the true self is what remains once every bit and every kind of false self has been jettisoned, because that does not elucidate what the true self *is*, and because there might be a neutral self in between a false self and the true self. Plus, no one can without God's grace be sure that every bit and kind of false self is gone. Merton wavers between saying that each person has to *discover* his or her true self or has to *create* his or her true self. Either way, it is unclear whether a person's true self, once discovered or created, can *change*. Moreover, it is unhelpful to suggest that each person is nothing before God, as Merton sometimes appears to do. In the Christian tradition, after all, each person is a child of God and made in God's image and likeness.

The Carthusian life is an ideal of sorts, and it makes little difference that so few have a calling to it. At present, there are roughly 370 monks in nineteen charterhouses and 75 nuns in five charterhouses across the globe. It is a worthy project, sometimes made available by a life of silence and solitude, to put away self-ignorance and self-deception in favor of a deeper knowledge of a person's motivations and a greater love of God. The Carthusian life involves substantial amounts of solitude and auditory and metaphorical silence.

As an ideal, a life of silence and solitude might seem too inward and too self-centered. It might also seem to be partial, in that it manifests love of God with insufficient manifestation of love toward persons other than oneself.

The merits of the foregoing reservations – excessive inwardness, self-centeredness, and partiality – depend in part on one's views of intercessory prayer. For Carthusians, these forms of prayer are part of their chosen life. Further, the exposition of the love commandment along with the parable of the good Samaritan and the Mary-Martha story (Luke 10:25-42), whether read traditionally as “one thing is necessary” or read nontraditionally as “few things are necessary or just one”, heeds Laird's advice and the Carthusian way about the “necessity” of loving God in contemplative prayer.⁵¹ We should, moreover, allow that

50. Cf. Walter E. Conn, «Self-Transcendence, the True Self, and Self-Love», *Pastoral Psychology*, 46 (1998), pp. 323-32, especially pp. 327-29.

51. See Peter C. Erb, «The Contemplative Life as the Unum Necessarium: In Defense of a Traditional Reading of Luke 10:42», *Mystics Quarterly*, 11 (no. 4, 1985), pp. 161-64. The NJB has “and yet few [things] are needed, indeed only one”, and in a note it makes listening to the word of God as the “one thing necessary”.

ideals vary across time and across persons, and that some ideals clash with others.⁵² If at times silence and solitude are part of a larger intrinsically good life, and if they are integral to this intrinsically good life, then they may well be strong constitutive goods at those times.

6. CONCLUSION

Indeed, we ought not to lose sight of how both Christian experiences and practices of silence can each be parts of a larger, intrinsically good Christian life. We should not say, with Hume, that this so-called "monkish virtue" inevitably "cross[es] all desirable ends". Silence has much to recommend it. Silence can cause, lead to, express, make up, or travel with other goods – so long as one steers clear of perils such as kenotic spirituality and unrestrained solitariness.

Still, just as silence can concomitantly travel along with certain goods, so can undesirable traits like excessive inwardness and self-centeredness travel along with silence. With discernment we can thread the needle between judging silence as entirely bad and maintaining that silence is indispensable to a Christian life. Salutary silence lies somewhere in between.⁵³

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52. See P. F. STRAWSON, «Social Morality and Individual Ideal», *Philosophy*, 36 (1961), pp. 1-17, especially pp. 1-4, 16-17.

53. I thank John Kardosh, Herbert Morris, and Gabriel Santos-Neves, whose comments and suggestions contributed greatly to the improvement of this article. I am indebted to UCLA library staff members Shangching Huitzaqua and Gabriel Juárez for kindly retrieving many of the sources cited here.

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