

BOOK REVIEWS

MUERS, Rachel, *Keeping God's Silence: Towards a Theological Ethics of Communication* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. viii + 246. ISBN 1-4051-1900-4, Paper, £19.99, Cloth, £65.00.

This exercise in contemporary theology is written by a Quaker, but it has only an oblique relevance to the academic study of Quakerism itself. Even so, the brief analysis of Quaker silence in a chapter on 'interpreting practices of silence' (pp. 145-54) could be immensely helpful in enabling us to understand the variety of the practices within it. It is, or can be (to summarise this section),

1. an 'interruption' of regular communications,
2. an 'attitude' appropriate to the holiness of God,
3. an emblem of the 'non-instrumental nature' of worship,
4. a preparation for a situation of 'liminality', which might take us beyond what can be known within language,
5. a participation in God's 'opening up of space' for the world,
6. a shift of the initiative from the self to God ('calling on God'),
7. the learning of a different kind of reasoning (*logos*) from that of mere talking,
8. a setting aside of human differences to foster community, and finally,
9. an opening up of space for each to become 'one who is heard' (pp. 147-53).

These precise reflections on Quaker practice require the theoretical reflections of the rest of the book to make full sense. It will then be seen that, not only is there a great variety of meanings that silence may have, but also that a particular practice or experience of silence may be deeply ambiguous. Is it liberating or oppressive, unifying or isolating, deep or shallow? And is what is intended in a particular practice experienced that way?

But the book has a wider concern; it is not primarily analytical. It is exploring the significance of silence for Christian theology as a whole. 'In this book, I ask how attention to the significance of silence, and to the significance of God's silence, can reshape understandings and practices of communication in the twenty-first century' (p. 3). So it is aimed, quite ambitiously, at a critique of contemporary practices of communication and the fostering of a new practice which gives some place to silence, and in particular to silent listening. So what starts off, quite modestly, as an exploration of what theologians and others have said about silence, develops into a serious

challenge to the way theology itself is done, and indeed, to the way other researches are done, and conversations held.

Its first concern, then, is to get to a theology of silence. It draws attention to the paradox that silence is often considered important in a religion that gives undisputed priority to the Word, and none more so than in modern, liberal Protestantism. Muers's main conversation partner is in fact the outstanding Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. But she works on this paradox until it becomes clear that something has gone seriously wrong in giving such authority to the Word, and that something of immense value has been squeezed out by it.

Her critique of verbosity and 'the war of words' draws a lot from recent feminist theology, which has had to cope with the obvious 'silencing' of women in Christianity. But it also goes beyond it, concluding even with a challenge to it (pp. 221–24), because she finds a ground for silence, and specifically silent listening, in 'the listening activity of God'. This is the most original, and also the most elusive, part of her book. What does it mean to say 'God hears', if this is not a mere anthropomorphism? In particular, what does it mean that 'God hears his own word'? There is much subtlety in Muers's writing on this theme, and I am not sure I have fully understood it. She is, of course, working with the categories and discourse of modern academic theology, so she is accepting ways of speaking of God that will be taken for granted in that context, but which may well seem strange or obscure outside of it. But given that theological discourse is always dealing with metaphor, it is possible to see how her paradoxical writing may make sense: how it transcends the understanding of God derived primarily from an interpretation of 'God's word'. It shows what it might mean, in line with some strands of the Christian tradition, to undertake to 'keep God's silence'. Bringing an end to talk, giving way to listening and attending in silence can open up a whole new way of understanding, which is open, moreover—and paradoxically—to many more voices than we had heard before.

But having read this impressive argument I am left with a sense that there are still things to be said. I mean this not so much as a criticism of the book as an invitation to further inquiry. What, then, seem to be required? I would suggest three things:

1. An exploration of what silence allows us to experience, when it includes a silence of thoughts as well as of words. In meditation, for example, it can allow us to see things differently and to see ourselves and others differently, because reality is here dissociated from the frameworks of language by which we normally perceive it. Also, it allows an immediacy of awareness—often of the trivial or incidental—which can even make 'the minute particular' transparent to a larger, cosmic reality.
2. A discussion of the Holy Spirit, which in Christian theology is usually associated with the subjective preparedness to hear, understand and love the other. Isn't it (also) through humans that God hears?
3. A final questioning of the Protestant commitment to the priority of the Word. Hasn't her argument tipped the balance away from the text towards silence, or, as the early Quakers would have said, from word to spirit? If so, then theology would seem to become a quite different inquiry.

The book still bears the marks of the PhD research from which it arose. Each main chapter is the working through of the complex theme the literature presents; as these are woven together to form a book there are many references to what has already been said in a previous chapter, and many anticipations of what is to come, which all adds to the complexity. These main chapters lack the clarity of argument that we find in the Introduction and the final chapter 'Openings', which were presumably written afterwards, when the main issues had finally been worked through. This means that the book is hard work, even to those familiar with modern theology, but it is work that will yield rich insights.

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