Chapter 10

Silence will Change the World: Kierkegaard, Derrida and Islamic Sufism

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Søren Kierkegaard proposed silent retreat from the noise of the world, repeated day after day and year after year, as the only way to hear God's Word. His ambition to write about silence, passion, and faith takes him to the limits of a philosophy of reflection and of language itself. For these notions, says Judith Butler, cannot “be grasped or ‘understood’ by any rational effort or thought or synthesis” since they are inseparable from “the infinite” which must “be affirmed nonrationally and hence passionately, at the limits of thought.”1 If a philosophy of spirituality is possible, this may be a good place to look for it, but exactly how can philosophy articulate these notions of silence, faith, and passion? This chapter explores that question by tracing a resistance to social noise (including the noise created by religion) that, across cultures, heeds a call to silence. A retreat from public life through radical silence, it will argue, reveals the space of faith in which our responsibility to our neighboring other can be realized.

I will demonstrate that there is a special affinity between Kierkegaard’s call to silence and the recitation and meditation practices of Sufism (a mystical branch of Islam). Both retreat from the world to prevent forgetting the Word of God and, therefore, our responsibilities to the world. And comparing the spiritualities of an approach within Christianity and Islam is timely. For religious fundamentalism is a global problem and practices of spiritual silence have the potential to disarm the dogmatism that creates dangerous religious deadlock. My approach also suggests how, in the context of an Islamic tradition, a spirituality distinct from religion can be conceived. Born and raised in Algeria, Jacques Derrida’s thinking on Kierkegaard is a helpful medium for understanding these intersecting perspectives. His later work on religion reiterates that

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“Islam is not Islamism, never forget that” and this is in the same spirit of the Algerian intellectual Mustapha Chérif who says: “the instrumentalization of religion to political ends” must give way to an exploration of the relationship to the other inherent in Islam.

1 Silent Definitions

Silence has tremendous secular, spiritual, and environmental significance in our lives. Silence can be useful, attentive, focused and a defence against intrusion but, on the other hand, it can be awkward, resentful or even deadly. As Don Ihde writes, a “face-to-face meeting without any word results in awkward silence, because in the meeting there is issued a call to speak” or, in other words, the voice of another can be rejected through silence. There are also many political and ethical dimensions of silence: the prisoner who chooses to remain silent as a vindication of her or his innocence or to protect another, the political prisoner who is silenced by force, or the silent protestor.

Furthermore, the idea of the very possibility of silence can be contested. Susan Sontag writes in “The Aesthetics of Silence” that the performance artist John Cage insisted “there is no such thing as silence. Something is always happening that makes a sound.” Here, Cage defines silence as though it were always regulated by sound and noise. Yet silence has many forms and different qualities. Bernard Dauenhauer discusses silence as a “positive phenomenon” rather than a “muteness [or] mere absence of audible sound,” comparing the difference between silence and muteness to the difference between “being without sight and having one’s eyes closed.” Both Dauenhauer and Cage contend that “silence is not merely linked with some active human performance. It is itself an active performance.”

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3 Chérif and Derrida, Islam, 102.
6 Ihde, Listening, 180.
9 Dauenhauer, Silence, 4.