



# Jesus in the Balance: Interpretation in the Twenty-First Century

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Luther's real location is among the literate "primitivist" Catholic reformers of the day, those who wished to see a wholesale cleansing of the Church and its schools which would restore to theology its proper character as a discipline of interpretation, engaging with Scripture and the early Fathers, not simply of analysis, the organization of conceptual structures of late scholastic speculation.

—Rowan Williams<sup>1</sup>

[Cognitively,] religions have always offered a comprehensive interpretation of the world: they assign human beings their place in the universe of things. Only with the loss of their competence to provide a world view in modern times did a tendency develop to understand religion as "feeling" or as a call for "decision."

—Gerd Theissen<sup>2</sup>

**W**hile failure of a religious worldview is certainly a major turning point in the history of Christianity, there is arguably a more fundamental paradigm shift that takes place a century and a half earlier: the loss of an interpretive tool that I shall call the work of silence. Two of the most important consequences of this shift

<sup>1</sup>Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 2nd rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1990) 154.

<sup>2</sup>Gerd Theissen, *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1999) 7.

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*"The work of silence" is an interpretive tool largely lost in our time. As a result, we turn "putting on the mind of Christ" into imitation of Christ and faith into propositional belief.*

are loss of the discerning balance between silence and speech—one way of reading the kenotic hymn (Phil 2:5–11, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...”)—and a concomitant and perhaps fatal turning from “putting on the mind of Christ” to imitation. Words without silence lead to distortion and irrelevance within institutions, while spirituality that does not pass through the refiner’s fire of word and liturgy can result in the often absurd sentimental pursuits of today’s spiritual marketplace.

Crises in religion, however else they are viewed, ultimately seem to manifest the age-old conflict between silence and speech, between receptivity and tyranny, between kenosis and self-aggrandizement. This tension is not confined to Judaism or Christianity; it seems endemic to the way humans function. But it erupts with particular force in Jesus’ ministry and escalates in the early days of the communities gathered in his name.

## HISTORY

In *Jesus the Jew*, Geza Vermes has shown how deeply Jesus was rooted in the Jewish tradition of prophet and holy man.<sup>3</sup> Although silence is not a featured topic in Vermes’s discussion, he repeatedly notes its importance in their lives, signaled especially by the “Abba” sayings, which were not exclusive to Jesus. Contemporary with Jesus is Philo, who explores the work of silence, blending a Hellenistic perspective with his Semitic inheritance. But the mingling of Semitic and Hellenistic thought is not always so smooth. In the wake of Jesus, Semitic attitudes merge also with Persian, pagan, and other mythologies to produce sometimes bizarre cosmologies and worldviews.

As patrologists keep reminding us, there has never been any agreement about what Christianity is, what the death of Jesus means, or resurrection. From the beginning there is conflict between those wishing to accrue institutional power to themselves and those gathering for mutual support and thanksgiving for the transfiguration that occurs in the kenotic process of silence through meeting the Word who is silence. In the second century, those advocating more interior interpretations of the gospel were anathematized as heretics by institutionally minded bishops, who urged their followers instead toward imitation and martyrdom.<sup>4</sup>

For the first millennium of their history, Western Christian institutions blew hot and cold both on the tradition of silence and the guardians of that tradition, for the kenotic work of silence is inherently subversive to hierarchies and claims. When Christianity became a tool of the state, many followers of the silence tradition fled to the desert. Imperial Christianity could not ignore them. It coped in part by spinning the desert fathers and mothers as white martyrs. The silence tradition

<sup>3</sup>Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973).

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Elaine Pagels and Karen L. King, *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity* (New York: Viking, 2007). For a similar point of view coming from a completely different starting point, see also Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise* (Boston: Beacon, 2008).

continued to be preserved in the West by way of monasticism, while in the East, writers such as Isaac of Nineveh (seventh century) combined beauty of prose with an almost clinical description of its processes.

The eleventh century saw a dramatic and fatal shift away from the silence tradition toward imitation. Gregory VII's reforms sought to centralize Christianity in Rome and to extend the political power of the papacy. The renewed conflict is symbolized by the ironic coincidence of the dates 1084–1085, which mark the foundation of the Carthusians and the translation of Aristotle, respectively.

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Over the next three centuries, tensions rose to the breaking point between a political camp that used words as weapons under the guise of dialectic and sought to freeze doctrine into formulas and a “spiritual” camp that insisted that familiarity with the silence from which words spring and to which they refer must not be lost, that dialectic is to be used in service of silence. Aquinas and Bonaventure mark the end of scholastic theology that sought a balance between silence and speech.<sup>5</sup>

The efflorescence of contemplatives at the end of the thirteenth and throughout the fourteenth centuries was in part a protest against institutional pursuit of analysis and definitions, and increasingly narrow interpretations in service of the institution's power. The hierarchy became threatened by any speech about silence that did not fit accepted formulas; the Inquisition appeared in 1233.

Marguerite Porete was burned at the stake in 1310 because she refused to conform her accurate psychological description of the work of silence to pious cliché. She refused to defend herself—how could someone who has never done the work of silence possibly know what she is talking about?—and in silence went to the flames.

At the beginning of the fifteenth century there is more irony: the author of the luminous, fecund, and arguably the greatest theological text to come out of the Middle Ages, Julian of Norwich, may still have been alive while the Council of Constance (1414–1418) was condemning the church to sterility.

The last great exponent of silence within the institution is Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464). It took only one generation—between Cusa's death in 1464 and Luther's birth in 1483—for silence finally to disappear from the institutional interpretive repertoire. It is significant that during this generation Thomas à Kempis

<sup>5</sup>Chartres Cathedral is an architectural example of this balance. See the excellent discussion in Philip Ball's *Universe of Stone* (New York: Harper, 2008).

writes his *Imitation of Christ*, which abandons the primary Christian goal of union with God for “an appeal made for a practical asceticism in the hope of a more submissive alignment of the initiate’s own will with that of the Creator.”<sup>6</sup> The destructive ramifications of this silencing of silence affect our lives to this day. Silence has become alien, even something to be feared.

Luther’s crisis is provoked in part by the mental feedback loops that take over when the language of faith no longer refers to the silence from which it arises and to which it returns. His realization that “the righteousness of God was not ‘active’—that by which God condemns—but ‘passive’—that by which he finds us acceptable by making us righteous” points toward the silence tradition, as Rowan Williams suggests.<sup>7</sup>

But he is perhaps too damaged by what he suffered early on, too hemmed about by institutional concerns, and too badly in need of a means of discernment to be able to break away from the language wars and a need for a confession of faith. The word “faith” is key to his theology, but in the end it seems to require framework sympathetic to, but falling short of, the open-ended intransitive verb of the Gospel of John.<sup>8</sup>

Although in the West the silence tradition vanishes from mainline institutional practice and interpretation in most denominations, it is kept alive by a dwindling number of advocates: dissidents (for example, Quakers, Shakers), humanists, metaphysical poets, and, in the twentieth century, by figures such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Simone Weil. Weil seems particularly difficult for modern scholars to appreciate, unfamiliar as they are with the silence tradition, kenotic theology, and the exaggerated metaphor often used to express them. In fact, lacking the most basic knowledge of these traditions, modern interpretations of ancient and medieval writings, of Scripture, liturgy, and doctrine are often fatally short-circuited.

The disappearance of the word “behold” from modern Bible translations is symptomatic. The word is beautifully amplified by Julian of Norwich.<sup>9</sup> “Behold” is a theological word signifying union, an exchange of being between God and the human person. “Behold, a virgin shall conceive.” It is in the beholding that Mary conceives; the rest of the sentence is for those who do not behold.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup>E. E. S. Lotz, “Secret Rooms: Private Spaces for Private Prayer in Late Medieval Burgundy and the Netherlands” (DPhil thesis, Oxford University, 2005) 117. Lotz points out (p. 201) that, at this time, even Carthusians were abandoning the goal of pure prayer, succumbing to devotional sentimentality, which is exactly what Carthusian life supposedly seeks to discourage.

<sup>7</sup>Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, 154–161.

<sup>8</sup>This insight derived from a lecture by Judith Lieu given in the Oxford University Classics department in the autumn of 2006.

<sup>9</sup>This text cannot be translated. The best version is edited by Marion Glasscoe, *Julian of Norwich: A Revelation of Love* (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1993). To read this text is no more difficult—and uses the same skills—as reading cell phone text messages.

<sup>10</sup>Vincent Gillespie and Maggie Ross, “The Apophatic Image: The Poetics of Effacement in Julian of Norwich,” in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England V*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992) 53–77.

## THE WORK OF SILENCE

What is “the work of silence”? By this phrase, I mean the process of arriving at interior stillness at the deepest level of our core silence, especially receptivity to what transpires out of sight of the observing I/eye (self-consciousness). This process is not only an important tool for interpretation of and discernment regarding ancient practices and spiritual texts, it is also an important interpretative tool for making them alive for congregations in the twenty-first century. In the brief sketch that follows, I will use the work of silence as a way of understanding Phil 2:5–11. I also will suggest that its process generates the ethics associated with Jesus and that it is possibly the most objective tool of discernment for doctrinal, liturgical, and political sifting. My use of the term “mind” in this discussion includes the heart, even though the work of the mind may appear to be foremost, because the mind is where articulation and self-consciousness reside.

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Coincidentally, the simple process I am referring to has increasing validation in contemporary scientific work on the brain. While this validation is interesting, in some ways it lags far behind ancient and medieval understanding. The news, for example, that paradox governs insight is no news at all for the ancient and medieval worlds.<sup>11</sup>

To reflect on one’s own mind does not require education: as Jean Gerson (1363–1429) remarked, “Even women and idiots can reach the highest levels of contemplation.”<sup>12</sup> Humans have long understood that while self-consciousness—the awareness that we are aware, the observing I/eye—seems to distinguish us as humans from animals,<sup>13</sup> its elision opens us to the divine. To realize our full humanity, we must put on divinity.<sup>14</sup> To realize our divinity, we must put on the *mind of Christ* (the work of silence). To put on the mind of Christ means a kenotic relinquishing of the contents of our self-consciousness—experience, perspective, interpretation, emotion, imaginative stereotypes, and projections—into silence so that we may be sprung from the trap of our own circular thinking. This breakout is salvation, for everything that we call “law” arises from the insecurity underlying

<sup>11</sup>Jonah Lehrer, “The Eureka Hunt,” *The New Yorker*, 28 July 2008, 40–45.

<sup>12</sup>Georges Duby and Philippe Braunstein, “The Emergence of the Individual,” in *A History of Private Life*, vol. 2 of *Revelations of the Medieval World*, ed. Georges Duby, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap, 1988) 619.

<sup>13</sup>An assumption that today is radically called into question as numerous animals and birds have shown themselves to be self-aware.

<sup>14</sup>For a very different approach with a similar conclusion, see, for example, Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 561.

the world of illusion we create with our self-consciousness, driven by its fear of death (Heb 2:15).

Imitation opposes the mind of Christ. To imitate is to pursue a life based on imaginative stereotypes and projections, which are easily formed and insinuated by a controlling hierarchy. Imitation, however piously and devoutly meant, becomes a kind of religious performance art, progressively reductive with the passage of time. Imitation breeds dependence on arbiters of stereotype and fear of consequence if one does not measure up. By contrast, putting on the mind of Christ results in an inviolable vulnerability, a healthy autonomy, and an unshakable integrity.

The work of silence has been endlessly and beautifully elaborated, but its elements can be simply stated. The process takes us beyond the level of everyday noise and self-consciousness through various stages until we engage a deep silence where self-consciousness is not operative. This suspension of self-consciousness happens many times every day in the normal course of things, but unless an unusual amount of time passes unawares the absent “I” goes unremarked. There is also a suspension of self-consciousness that occurs during meditation. But both of these examples are ephemeral. With repeated practice and a focused intentionality, the part of our brain not actively in use can rest in and help us live from the wellspring of silence.

In our core silence, the distortions of self-consciousness are not operative. It is here that the content of our lives is transfigured—in both the literary and religious sense—and given back to us a new creation. In this core silence, we meet God: incarnation, transfiguration, and resurrection are conflated. Repeated practice effects *metanoia*, gives us an ethics by which to live, and, for Christians, casts a very different light on what we commonly think of as doctrine. In Julian of Norwich’s terms, perseverance in the work of silence enables us to “seek into the beholding,” seamlessly and continuously, as we go about our daily round, our self-conscious mind informed by and continually referring to the silence from which our living truth unfolds.

#### INTERPRETING THE KENOTIC HYMN

We might say that the mind proceeds by narrative (normal, everyday consciousness), paradox (characteristic of stilling the mind), and reversal (transfiguration and new creation), which is also the form of the kenotic hymn. The insight research mentioned above sums up the operational paradox nicely. Experiments by John Kounios showed that a Zen practitioner was unmatched in solving insight problems, from his paradoxical ability to focus on *not* being focused. This gave him “the cognitive control to let go.”<sup>15</sup> A more familiar example of the mind’s operational paradox is the word on the tip of the tongue. To have a chance of recovering

<sup>15</sup>Lehrer, “The Eureka Hunt,” 44.

the word, one must forget both the word and the fact that one is trying to remember.<sup>16</sup> One-pointed meditation is yet another useful model. Focusing on a word, or the breath, or the task at hand allows our narratives to elide into silence.<sup>17</sup>

The work of silence, of which meditation is only a first and minor step, is organic. It focuses the mind away from itself. It has no hierarchy, no geometry. The problem in writing about it is that language is always self-referential, hierarchical, and dualistic. To bridge this abyss, responsible religious language must always acknowledge its provisional character and continually refer back to the silence.<sup>18</sup> A related problem is that what we call experience, especially religious experience, is always interpretation. When we write about experience we are at yet another remove of interpretation; by contrast, the work of silence relinquishes all claims to experience.

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There are many ways to bridge the gap between the organic nature of silence and the dual, reflexive nature of language. Some work by manipulating syntax and image; others create myth, folklore, parable. However else it is interpreted, we might think of the kenotic hymn (Phil 2:5–11) in this way.

Paul introduces the hymn by emphasizing unity in diversity. He highlights humility, by which he means not hanging on to our *idées fixes* for the purposes of self-promotion and self-inflation.<sup>19</sup> Orientation toward the other is effected by having the mind of Christ, which is described in the verses that follow.<sup>20</sup>

Our self-consciousness coupled with our inventive rationality gives us the idea that we are little gods, each of us at the center of a little universe. If we cling to this illusory and anxious narrative, we become prey to manipulation, the push-me-pull-you of what other people think, our status, our possessions, our fame or lack of it. This is the level of noise. But it is very frightening to let go of illusion, what *appears* to be our life, our “equality with God.” Here the RSV’s “grasped” is a far more appropriate translation than the NRSV’s theologically misleading “exploited” (see Phil 2:6). We do have a shared nature with God, but it is the opposite of what appears and what we attempt to hold on to.

To choose to enter silence, to let go of the illusion of power and control, is very like death. But it is this passage that sets “free those who all their lives were

<sup>16</sup>Marvin Shaw, *The Paradox of Intention: Reaching the Goal by Giving Up the Attempt to Reach It* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

<sup>17</sup>Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). This is the best book to be published on meditation for decades.

<sup>18</sup>Gillespie and Ross, “The Apophatic Image.”

<sup>19</sup>Humility and humiliation are opposites.

<sup>20</sup>Note the sequence: in modern terms, it is not “program” that has priority.

held in slavery by the fear of death” (Heb 2:15). We must become willing slaves of a different sort, wholly given over to that silence where the observing I/eye is no longer present. *This* is faith, not propositional belief. Dread is appropriate: this is a “space for dangerous exploration and immense change.”<sup>21</sup> This humbling, this letting go of our ideas and stereotypes stretches and opens us far beyond what we imagine our selves to be; it is a crucifixion, indeed.

Thus we enter the “therefore” of the hymn, the limitless space of gift and potential. Here is the tomb of our illusion and the birthplace of the soul, the transfiguration of our ordinary lives, of resurrection. Here we encounter the outpouring of love we call God engaging God’s image in us, for it is our self-forgetful outpouring that is this imageless image. This engagement and its effects are known only in retrospect, of course, by hints, by the effects in our lives, for the observing I/eye is not present. There is no experience. This giving up of the illusion of security is the only security. It is not a place, there is no progress or achievement, only the kenotic gaze on gaze.

#### THE EFFECTS OF KENOSIS

This wellspring becomes the source of all we do, affecting any part of our life or mind we desire to commit to it. We can intend that any part of our mind that is not actively in use should rest there; we can learn to listen with the active part of our mind for what arises from it to inform our speech and actions. Growth into God is never a matter of either/or: we need a balance of words and silence, so that our words are *logophatic*, that is, that they arise from and are refined by the energy of engagement in the deepest silence where the truth of the self unfolds.<sup>22</sup>

The work of silence exposes the danger of words, of doctrines and dogmas written in stone. It generates a kenotic ethic, a self-emptying in our relationships that creates a welcoming, safe, neutral, nonmanipulative, nonjudgmental space where the self-outpouring truth of the other may be free to emerge and engage ours. A community is only as healthy as the solitudes that make it up, and those solitudes are healthy only insofar as they do the work of silence. Any “ministry” (a word that should be eliminated from our vocabularies along with “formation” and, above all, “spiritual director”) that does not have its source in the work of silence is dysfunctional, patronizing, and exploitive.

All of the usual vices—pride, anger, avarice, greed, narcissism, condemnation, scorn—must be let go if we are to enter silence. It is not that we do not have opinions, but rather that silence teaches us how inadequate and provisional our interpretation of others, of life situations, is and always will be.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Rowan Williams, personal communication.

<sup>22</sup>Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Notions of “true self” and “false self” are highly destructive. The spiritual life is not a procrustean bed. All is grist for the mill of silence; nothing is wasted.

<sup>23</sup>See posts on “Ethics Issuing from Silence,” at [ravenwilderness.blogspot.com](http://ravenwilderness.blogspot.com) for 11, 17, and 25 August 2008, and 8 September 2008.



Far from trying to wrench our wills this way and that or forcing ourselves to believe seven impossible things before breakfast, we come to the work of silence leaving behind all of our ordinary religious baggage and language. Only in this way can we begin to understand where religious language comes from, how provisional it is, and how essential is its continual reference to silence.

#### INTERPRETING THE GARDEN

The work of silence is an effective tool of interpretation for Old and New Testaments, for religious writing, for discerning appropriate liturgy. For example, the story of Adam, Eve, and the snake can be interpreted as a story of distraction.<sup>24</sup> Before the first conversation with the snake, their beholding is seamless. After it, they are completely disoriented. Everything that follows in the story is an account of their hallucination, just as our ordinary waking lives are more or less hallucinatory. Their new preoccupation with language and self means that what was once familiar—qualities of life they had taken for granted—is now strange, alien, and painful. Their fear of God walking in the garden, the angel with the flaming sword, the curses—these are images that grow in minds that are clutching at straws, even if those straws are terrifying. Poor old practical God never stops loving them but heaves a great sigh and makes them some clothes.

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In a tragic sense, we are luckier than Adam and Eve because we have gotten used to our ongoing hallucination and disorientation, even though there is something in the back of our minds that beckons us to find our way home to the silence of the heart we share with God. It is far easier for us to remain in the prison of our projections and distorted interpretations, with all their devastating consequences, than to do the work of silence, which would enable us to have a life with God that is even better than the primordial one. We have the choice to remain in the heedless prison of our ongoing hallucination, which is acted out in the very real suffering of the material world, or to do the kenotic work of silence, which halts our heedlessness and reconnects us.

Through the transfiguring love we encounter in this silence, we are once more related to God by a restored innocence more profound than Adam and Eve's, for we have chosen and worked for it—the paradoxical work of letting go. As we become rooted in silence, the hallucination starts to fade, we forget about our-

<sup>24</sup>Irenaeus (ca. 130–200) understands “the Fall” (a nonscriptural term) as distraction.

selves, and we begin to engage the creation with something greater than original reverence. Jesus, the second Adam, is our model in this; we might think of him as the Undistracted, for his gaze never leaves the face of God. Even as he grows and matures, he is the paradigm and parable of silence.<sup>25</sup>

Jesus is the charismatic teacher who wishes his disciples to share in his messianic mission to manifest the kingdom of God—which is within us.<sup>26</sup> By his life and death he shows us the way to the en-Christing that the kenotic hymn describes. Christ is a *process*, and since the work of silence is common to all human beings no matter how they may express it, we can understand in this way why a saying such as “Christ is the only way” might be appropriate even in a multicultural world.

The work of silence is also a tool of discernment. Liturgy, for example, should point us always beyond itself: however simple or splendid, the rule of thumb *every true sacred sign effaces itself* should be brought to bear.<sup>27</sup> Religion is not about the glorification of an institution, or those in its hierarchy.

I have referred to Rowan Williams several times in this article, not only because of his scholarship, but also because he shows how leadership can be kenotic. The sad fact is that the work of silence and the theology of kenosis have become so marginalized that most people fail to recognize such leadership for what it is.<sup>28</sup>

But if institutional Christianity is to survive it must return to kenotic theology and its work of silence. This ancient foundational process gives us twenty-first-century tools to revivify our language, sift our doctrines, and enable us, however modestly, to become the bearers of the kingdom into which we are baptized. ⊕

MAGGIE ROSS is the author of *The Fire of Your Life: A Solitude Shared and Pillars of Flame: Power, Priesthood and Spiritual Maturity (with a new foreword by Archbishop Desmond Tutu)*, both recently reissued by Seabury Press; and *Silence: A User's Guide*, forthcoming.

<sup>25</sup>Using the work of silence as a tool of interpretation also casts new light on familiar and sometimes puzzling texts, such as the Beatitudes and the parables.

<sup>26</sup>See, for example, Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*.

<sup>27</sup>See my “Liturgy in Truth,” *Weavings* 21/3, May/June, 2006, 31–40.

<sup>28</sup>Williams's position is alluded to by Sally Vickers's review (in the 19 September 2008 *London Times*) of his new book on Dostoevski. “There are no ‘right’ beliefs or ideologies: there is always another way of looking or being. The only right is the exercise of freedom, freedom from the use of violence to control others or suppress their other ways.” Online at [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/books/non-fiction/article4787049.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/non-fiction/article4787049.ece).