

Chapter One

ASSESSING SILENCE

Introduction

Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen. (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*¹)

The technology of silence

The rituals, etiquette

the blurring of terms

silence not absence

of words or music or even

raw sounds

Silence can be a plan

rigorously executed

the blueprint to a life

It is a presence

it has a history a form

Do not confuse it

with any kind of absence

(Adrienne Rich, "Cartographies of silence"²)

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 1961), p. 150. See also *ibid.*, p. 2. "Whereof we cannot speak, that we must *pass over* in silence" is a slight overtranslation of Wittgenstein's sentence (part of the problem being the lack of a good English equivalent of *schweigen*). I use it in what follows because the resonance it brings out in the original phrase is particularly relevant to the subject at hand – while recognizing that the original is open to other interpretations.

² "Cartographies of silence," in Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974–1977* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), p. 17.

How do we know what it is that cannot be spoken about and must therefore be passed over in silence? Wittgenstein's famous sentence appears at both the beginning and the end of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. He announces the discovery of the "whereof we cannot speak" as his project, and marks its completion after the limitations of the speakable have been thoroughly explored and defined – through language.³ We might say that the silence at the end of the book has been defined by the words that precede it. The sentence that initially appears as a truism – of course we must be silent about the "whereof we cannot speak" – has acquired definite content, even if that content is by definition indescribable. The fact that the sentence is so often quoted in a wide variety of contexts draws attention to the transferability of the concept of the "whereof we cannot speak," how it can be redetermined in different discourses – how silence can come to mean, or refer to, many different things. As it stands, the aphorism places a non-specified subject (*man*, "one") over against an equally unspecified – and apparently impersonal – object (*wovon, darüber, "that which"*). It is not an injunction to anyone in particular about anything in particular – it is a general statement about the limits of speech, rather as Dauenhauer aims at a general account of "silence, the phenomenon."

The extract from Adrienne Rich's poem brings us back into the particular social contexts in which silence occurs and is maintained – "the technology of silence/the rituals, etiquette." The apparent ahistoricity of the "*man*" in Wittgenstein's aphorism is challenged by such a rereading; already the reader is forced to ask who "we" are who cannot speak of this or that. The question about that "whereof we cannot speak" is not just a question about what is, as such, incapable of being conveyed in language; it is a question about that whereof *we* in a particular situation or discursive context "cannot speak," and how we maintain its unspeakability.

Rich's poem, then, indicates the complexity of the silence that is kept concerning that "whereof we cannot speak." Silence has its "technology," the set of techniques by which it is achieved; but this is a communicative and social technology, consisting of "rituals" and "etiquette." Silence has "history" and "form;" so this description refers not to silence in general, but to some silence in particular, which in its specificity is not to be confused with "any kind of absence."

The second verse quoted above points to the more specific concern of Rich's poem, and indeed of much of her work. With the claim that "silence can be a plan," the question immediately arises, "Whose plan?"

³ See Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, p. 2: "Die Grenze wird . . . nur in der Sprache gezogen werden."

The challenge to the impersonality of Wittgenstein's *man* becomes sharper, as the possibility is raised that the consignment of something to the "whereof we cannot speak" is an act involving violence and allowing the assignation of responsibility.⁴ "Rigorously executed" reinforces the suspicion that this is a plan to impose silence, a plan that both carries out and conceals violence (*who* might have been "executed" in the "execution" of this plan of silence?). The "technology" of silence becomes the means whereby the violent silencing is maintained.

The rituals and etiquette are structured to ensure that something remains unsaid. However, at the same time, they maintain the silence as a particular silence – giving it "a presence . . . a history, a form." Whether or not the silence can be referred back to some original act ("a plan/ rigorously executed"), the silence itself becomes a "presence" through the rituals of concealment.⁵ The apparatus of secrecy in a totalitarian state, or the multiple layers of lies required to conceal an initial minor act of concealment, are familiar instances in the political sphere of the massive material "presence" and "form" of silences. The first two parts of Rich's poem consider this presence of silence in the lie that structures a conversation, a relationship or a whole life:

A conversation begins
with a lie . . .

A conversation has other laws
recharges itself with its own
false energy . . .

The loneliness of the liar
living in the formal network of the lie

twisting the dials to drown the terror
beneath the unsaid word⁶

The question, "Whose plan is this silence?" or "Who has determined what it is whereof we cannot speak?" raises the further question, "Who

⁴ See also the foreword to Adrienne Rich, *Of Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978* (London: Virago, 1980), pp. 9–18.

⁵ The uncovering of such acts of silencing through the "presences" of silence they create is one common description of the task of critical or suspicious reading, feminist or otherwise. See for a concise statement and discussion of the understanding of "silence" implied by this, Jack Bilmas, "Constituting Silence: Life in the World of Total Meaning" *Semiotica* 98, 1–2 (1994).

⁶ "Cartographies of Silence," 1 and 2.

keeps silent?" Rich's claim that silence can be "the blueprint to a life" suggests that a discourse's limits can be defined such that not only possible subject matter, but also possible speakers are excluded.⁷ The "history" and "technology" of silence can prevent a given speaker or group of speakers from entering a discourse or a conversation. For these silenced subjects to speak would require the disruption or destruction of "rituals" and "etiquette," and the rethinking or abandonment of the ways of life that depend on this particular "form" of silence. Yet the very fact that a continued practice of silencing occurs means that the "silence" of the excluded does not disappear into "absence." To be recognized as silent a person or group must be present. Were there nothing "whereof we cannot speak," there would be no need to mark, reinforce or debate the limits of possible speech.

To say that silence is "not absence" is to recall, not only the possibility of future speech from the one who is silent, but the fact that the "silenced" have their own history – and possibly their own speech, which is currently unheard. Defining silence as "absence" is part of the pretence by which silencing is maintained – the pretence that there is nothing there to be heard. The silencing of potential speakers perpetuates a lie.

Why does this form of silencing matter? Rich's poem points to two interconnected aspects of the experience of the silenced. On the one hand, silence becomes "the blueprint for a life;" being silenced is being unable to determine oneself as a speaker and thus to identify oneself by speaking. It is having one's life shaped by the silence imposed by another. On the other hand, silence is confused with "absence;" being silenced is being unrecognizable and unable to demand recognition within a social world ("the rituals, etiquette").⁸ Both of these are contained in the suggestion that to be silenced is to be depersonalized. The silence in Rich's poem is an "it," from which a possible "who" emerges gradually and ambiguously.

Rich is describing the silencing of lesbian women, the restriction of their lives by lies and secrets; but the basic dynamics of silencing to which her work points can be recognized in numerous contexts. In fact, it has been argued that modernity has seen the greatest possible act of silencing – the silencing of God.

⁷ Rich's work, both poetry and prose, analyzes the silencing of lesbian women both as objects of discourse and as speakers. The denial of the very existence of lesbian women is in Rich's understanding part of the process by which all women are silenced. See Rich, *Of Lies, Secrets and Silence*, pp. 9–18.

⁸ As we shall see, certain forms of silencing deprive their "objects" of the former (the power to be a speaker) but not of the latter (recognition).

The Silencing of God

Although it has often been suggested that God is silent, or that “silence” can appropriately refer to God, it is also the case that the “silence of God” as experienced in any historical context will have a specific “history” and “form.” Today, then, to speak of the “silence of God” is most often to refer to the prevalence of atheism, and of modes of discourse that apparently presuppose atheism. If this silence of God ceased even to appear as silence – if the word “God” or the possibility of a word from God were no longer thinkable – the silence of God would cease to have “a history, a form.” This is not yet entirely the case. The silence of God is a “presence;” it is still thought necessary to deny that God speaks. The silence of God has a “form” – for example, as the impossibility of authoritative/authorial speech.⁹ More significantly, the silence of God has a “history.” Its origins in certain specifically modern experiences of the world have been traced and discussed.¹⁰ God is silent because our speech and thought proceeds without hearing a word from or about God. Many have spoken of the “silence of God” in the context of the twentieth century’s experience of unassimilable and incomprehensible horror.¹¹

One further claim, with which I shall be concerned here, about the history and form of the late modern or postmodern silence of God is that it is the product of theological acts of silencing. The history and form of God’s silence can, according to the analysis I shall now consider, be traced within the history of theology, particularly in modernity – within the ways of talking about God that have reduced God to silence. The rules of speech about God, and the theological “etiquette” that reinforces them, have silenced God. Like Rich’s descriptions, the attack on the silencing of God argues that silencing is a lie – resting ultimately on the lie that claims self-sufficiency for human thought and action.

⁹ As most famously in the work of Roland Barthes – see Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” trans. Richard Howard, in Sallie Sears, ed., *The Discontinuous Universe: Selected Writings in Contemporary Consciousness* (New York: Basic, 1972). See also Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen Pinkus and Michael Hart (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

¹⁰ Perhaps most influentially by Walter Ong – see Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

¹¹ As in the work of Elie Wiesel – see Elie Wiesel, *Night (& Dawn; the Accident; Three Tales)*, trans. Stella Rodway (London: Robson, 1974), esp. pp. 42, 73–6. See also André Neher, “Shaddai: The God of the Broken Arch,” in Alvin H. Rosenfeld & Irving Greenberg, eds., *Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

Analyzing God's Silence

Compared to atheistic thoughtlessness, this is the much greater danger . . . that God will be talked to death, that he is silenced by the very words that seek to talk about him. Both . . . the dumb and the garrulous silencing of God are the result of the fact that we no longer dare to think God. (Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*¹²)

At the beginning of his work on *God as the Mystery of the World*, Eberhard Jüngel sets out what he takes to be the key problem for contemporary theology – the problem of the silencing of God. This silencing is, Jüngel claims, performed both in atheism – the “dumb silencing” of God – and in theology – the “garrulous silencing” of God. In fact, he will later argue, theology’s “garrulous silencing” of God is at least partly responsible for the “dumb silencing” of God in modern atheism. A kind of God-talk that effectively silences God has made it possible for subsequent thought simply to ignore the question of God.¹³

Jüngel’s critique of the modern “silencing of God” follows Karl Barth, and twentieth-century theology that reflects on and develops Barth’s work, in interpreting the turn to the human subject in theology as a refusal to admit the possibility of God’s speech. What is at stake is the freedom of God to speak for Godself, or, more precisely, to speak Godself as the basis for all possible speech about God. Not “daring to think God” is not daring to think God *as God*, that is, as the self-identifying subject of theological discourse, the one whose freedom to speak and become known in the world is in no way constrained by the limitations of human knowledge, thought, or speech; whose speech, indeed, is the “condition of possibility” for human knowledge, thought and speech (p. 227).

¹² Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) p. vii. Subsequent references appear in parentheses in the text.

¹³ This is not intended to be a full overview of Jüngel’s complex argument in *God as the Mystery of the World*. For fuller discussion, particularly of the understanding of speech and word that underlies the work, see Ingolf Dalferth, “God and the Mystery of Words,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 60 (1992); Roland Spjuth, *Creation, Contingency and Divine Presence in the Theologies of Thomas F. Torrance and Eberhard Jüngel* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1995), pp. 41–6; Roland Daniel Zimany, *Vehicle for God: The Metaphorical Theology of Eberhard Jüngel* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1991); John Webster, *Eberhard Jüngel: An Introduction to His Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); John Webster, ed., *The Possibilities of Theology: Studies in the Theology of Eberhard Jüngel in His Sixtieth Year* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994).

But why speak of the *silencing* of God in this connection? What specific aspects of the critique of previous theology and the engagement with modern atheism are named when the silencing of God is denounced? Jüngel locates his discussion of the silencing of God in a chapter on “The Speakability of God,” and specifies the problem by referring to the theological use of the conclusion of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* – “Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent” (p. 250ff.). The *Tractatus* quotation suggests an understanding of silence as being “beyond words” and pertaining to that which is “beyond words.” Speech reaches a limit, and whatever lies beyond the limit is consigned to silence. However the limits of possible speech are defined, silence is beyond them.

For Jüngel, what is at issue here is the definition of God’s mystery. The use of the quotation from the *Tractatus* (or its theological equivalents) would, he argues, define God’s mystery only negatively – as the *inexpressible*, the *unknowable*, the *unthinkable*. This would in turn render all talk of God “*inauthentic* talk,” failing to correspond to the reality of God in any way. It would have defined God as the “whereof we cannot speak” – and thereby, importantly, as something that cannot speak to *us*, the object at the limit of speech that cannot become the speaking subject.

Defining God’s mystery negatively, Jüngel suggests, would leave four possibilities open for talk about God:

- a) It is possible to *remain silent* about God and in that silence to *affirm* him, since he is totally unthinkable and therefore unspeakable . . .
- b) It is possible to *speak* of God as the one who is totally unthinkable and therefore unspeakable, and in speaking to *negate* him . . .
- c) It is possible to *remain silent* about God as one who is totally unthinkable and therefore unspeakable, and in remaining silent to *negate* him . . .
- d) It is possible to *speak* of God as one who is not unthinkable in every regard and thus is somehow speakable, and in speaking thus to affirm him . . . *non ut illud diceretur, sed non [sic] taceretur omnino*.¹⁴ (p. 252)

Jüngel’s judgment on these four possibilities – which he links respectively to mysticism,¹⁵ to atheism, to a point “beyond atheism” where the question of God no longer arises, and to “theism, deism, and . . . the meta-

¹⁴ Augustine of Hippo, *De Trinitate* 5 : 9 has *ne taceretur* – “Not in order to say something, but in order not to be silent.”

¹⁵ This attribution is omitted from the third edition, which is the only one translated into English. See Eberhard Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt: zur Begründung der Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus*, 2nd edn. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1977), p. 343.

physical tradition” – is uncompromising. “The Christian faith, if it understands itself properly, can only protest against each of these possibilities as well as against any combination of them” (p. 252).

What exactly is the object of “Christian” protest here? We can identify two forms of the “silencing of God” arising out of the negative understanding of mystery that Jüngel delineates. One is the “dumb silencing” of God – God is simply excluded from discourse, and even God’s “unspeakability” is not marked in speech. In assigning this (his option *c*) to a “point beyond theism and atheism” and speaking of it in the subjunctive mood,¹⁶ Jüngel indicates that this point has not in fact been reached. God’s silence continues, as I suggested above, to be a presence, to have a history and a form.

For this reason, the “garrulous silencing” of God is, as we learned in the introduction, the most urgent problem for Jüngel. How is God spoken of in such a way as to silence God? Two different forms of “garrulous silencing,” with their corresponding “technology” and “etiquette,” arise in Jüngel’s first and fourth possibilities, above – those he assigns to “mysticism” and “theism, deism and the metaphysical tradition.” In “mysticism” (his option *a*), speech, even theological speech, thematizes God *as* unspeakable, and hence silences God. In “theism”(his option *d*), more subtly, theological speech thematizes God in such a way as to imply and enact God’s incapacity to speak for Godself.

The “garrulous silencing” of God permits the word “God” to be used – it may indeed have a great deal to say about God – but does so within a framework that excludes God as a speaker. God is rendered mute by the philosophical move that defines God as “unthinkable and therefore unspeakable.” While this approach recognizes, and seeks to thematize, the difference between God and the world, it suggests that that difference can appear only through the self-silencing of language. This, however, requires – so Jüngel claims – the constitution of language and the thinkable as a self-contained and self-sustaining whole, which defines whatever lies outside it as the “whereof we cannot speak” (p. 251).

The consequence of Jüngel’s analysis of the “negative conception of mystery,” within his work, is the almost complete rejection of the apophatic tradition in Christian theology, as fundamentally opposed to that form of theological discourse within which “God is permitted to speak.” Defining God as mystery in the negative sense opens the possibility of a

¹⁶ In the German edition: “Eine solche Verarbeitung der Gottesfrage wäre dasjenige Jenseits von *Mystik*” (Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis*, p. 344). Note that in the introduction (p. 3) Jüngel apparently attributes this dumb silencing of God to *academic* discourse.

discourse that proceeds without the need for a word from or about God; and it makes God into one who could not in any case speak such a word. “The strictest reference to God as mystery would then have to be a finger placed to the lips . . . well known as an expression of Buddhist piety, but could well serve as the last gesticulation of European metaphysics” (p. 251). Silencing God is “depersonalizing” God – defining God as one who cannot identify Godself through speech, and refusing to acknowledge God’s speech as significant.

Jüngel’s proposed response to the silencing of God is a theological reaffirmation of God as the one who constitutes the world by speaking, and of theology as a “speaking after” God’s primary speech. Philosophical-theological attempts to limit God’s speech and speakability are rejected in favour of God’s self-definition *through speech as the one who speaks*. The affirmation that God speaks is the primary affirmation of theology, because the event of God’s speech is the event that makes theology possible.

Jüngel understands the addressing word as that which constitutes the hearer’s relation both to the word and to the world. God’s word is the primary “address,” in relation to which humanity is “‘*hearer of the word,*’ who cannot do anything at all as long as he is listening, and then on the basis of his hearing he can act out of the *newly gained freedom*” (p. 309, emphasis original). But what is communicated in God’s word is *God*, who “comes” to the world in God’s act of utterance. Both God’s “coming to the world” and God’s granting of freedom are associated with the biblical identification of God as love; but love in turn is regarded as inherently self-communicative, oriented towards utterance.¹⁷

The key point to note about this response to the silencing of God is that it requires not only an account of who God is, but also an account of what speech is and how it works. For Jüngel, God’s speech is like all speech in its basic character. Understandings of the world-constituting power of speech, and of the character of speech as interpersonal “address,” are adapted from recent linguistic philosophy and used to analyze and

¹⁷ See p. 261: “To grasp God as love, this certainly means to grasp God as self-communication . . . God is no more degraded or reduced in his being through his communicability than is a lover deprived of his power through his self-communicating love. All theological concern of this kind . . . fails to see that God is not envious.” p. 298: “Love possesses the power of speech: *caritas capax verbi.*” God’s self-determination as love, central to Jüngel’s work, will also be significant in my later discussion (see in particular chapter 6). I shall question, however, the association between love and speech, here taken as self-evident.

critique the silencing of God.¹⁸ My later discussion will raise questions both about the association between love and speech, and about the philosophical framework within which this response to the “silencing of God” is developed.

Commentary

What do we learn about the process of silencing from Jüngel’s account of the silencing of God? First, the silencing of God is, according to this analysis, a lie; God is not silent, but speaks. In fact, on this account, it is by speaking that God *as God* enters discourse concerning God; God must be recognized as the primary speaking subject, or talk about God becomes systematic falsehood.

Second, the “garrulous” silencing of God is attributed principally to the theology that developed from particularly modern concerns about the limits of human knowledge, and from attempts to specify the limits of discourse that we associate most readily with modernity. It is, by definition, twentieth-century theology that makes use of Wittgenstein’s concept of the “whereof we cannot speak;” and its use is read as the culmination of modern attempts to make human discourse self-contained and self-defining. The silencing of God is, then, on this account, the consequence of a discourse that claims the power to determine both what admits being spoken of and what is allowed to speak, and that is incapable of admitting the possibility of interruption from outside its self-imposed limits.

Third, the proposed “solution” is the recognition that God *does* speak Godself to the world, and, in the light of this, a return to “obedient hearing” as the primary human activity in relation to God’s communication. Theology should become a discourse that acknowledges its prior dependence on an act of hearing, and that attempts to “speak after” what it hears. The sphere in which “garrulous silencing” occurred is to undergo conversion, a conversion shaped and determined by the activity of the speaker it has previously silenced.

¹⁸ Jüngel’s concept of the “addressing word” is discussed further in chapter 4. For rather different attempts to overcome the “silencing of God” by re-examining the concept of divine speech, see Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998); Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997), and for a more complex understanding of the speech-act that follows a similar basic pattern, Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

The challenge Jüngel's analysis, and the approach it represents, offers to any Christian "theology of the silence of God" is whether it can avoid a violent silencing of God through "technology," "rituals," and theological "etiquette." Picking up Rich's words again, the risk in any attempt to read the silence of God positively is the "blurring of terms" that leads us to think God as only an "absence."

Does this criticism really apply to all attempts at developing genuinely theological accounts of the silence of God? It is possible, as Jüngel does, to tell the story of the silence of God in a way that links the apophatic tradition and monasticism, on the one hand, with modern atheism on the other. In his account, the "mystical theology" of Pseudo-Dionysius and others begins a tradition of "metaphysics" that passes through Descartes and ends somewhere after Wittgenstein. But it might already be apparent that the Wittgensteinian dictum – which is, after all, not explicitly referred in its context to any theological tradition – does not obviously capture the intention of the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius or John of Damascus, of the monastic disciplines of silence, or even of Schleiermacher's critique of anthropomorphism.

For these thinkers, to recognize God as "beyond" all finite words and concepts is precisely to guard against the kind of hubris of discourse of which Jüngel accuses certain traditions. *Apophasis* is what allows speech – about God or about the world – to be recalled to its source and limit in God. The incomprehensibility of God is a characteristic of God's essence and not of human thought or speech. God's "silence" is how God determines Godself to be; it is not just what any human discourse attempts to impose on God, nor just the mark of a deficiency or lack in God.¹⁹

What Jüngel rejects in the course of his discussion, then, may on a more careful listening hold out the possibility that the emphasis on God's *speech*, in considering how God "comes to" the world and grounds its practices of communication, is itself open to challenge. God's freedom from determination by the limits of discourse, and the act by which God relates Godself to the world, can, within the traditions Jüngel rejects, be thought otherwise than in terms of God's speech and speakability. This in turn suggests that there may be possible responses to the "silencing of God" that leave scope for a more positive reading of the communicative function of silence.

¹⁹ Thus the recognition that "God is not envious," discussed above, is precisely what underlies the praise of God's ineffability in John of Damascus; the self-sufficiency of God, unthinkable except as the self-sufficiency of trinitarian life, pertains to God's incomprehensibility. See John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, second series, vol. 9 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark), Book 1, chapter 1.

To see why such a reading might be particularly important in contemporary theology, I turn now to the consideration of another critique of silencing, which is very similar in form to the critique of the silencing of God.

The Silencing of Women

Analyses of silence

“Silence” has been a significant trope in feminist thought since its early days – feminist theology being no exception. The critique of the silencing of women – its “technology, rituals, and etiquette” – is well developed, as is the debate about the means by which this silence can be overcome.

The analysis of the silencing of women discovers, as in Jüngel’s analysis of the silencing of God, both a “dumb” and a “garrulous” silencing.²⁰ The “dumb” silencing occurs where women are simply ignored within the philosophical, political, or theological discourse dominated by men. The theoretical aspects of this silencing include the construction of the universal subject as male, and the exclusion of concerns specific to women (however understood) from public consideration. Clearly these theoretical positions have their counterparts in social and institutional “technologies” – the processes by which women are prevented from speaking. The absence of “women,” in the definitions of humanity used in these public conversations, is mirrored by the absence of women’s voices from the conversations themselves.

In Christian theology, prominent concerns pertaining to the “dumb silencing” of women have included the predominance of male imagery for God, the use of “man” and masculine pronouns in liturgy and theological texts that purportedly refer to humanity as a whole (both reflect-

²⁰ On all the forms of silencing discussed in this section, see further Rebecca Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), pp. 24–30. Chopp’s work is particularly important for the argument advanced here, in that she recognizes that feminist theology calls, not only for a different pattern of access to communication, but for a different theological understanding of what communication is or can be. She approaches this task through a reinterpretation of the key concept of “proclamation,” interpreting feminist theology as a form of “proclamation” that is at the same time “emancipatory transformation.” In an analysis of “proclamation,” however, she finds it necessary to refer to the activity of listening as its prerequisite (p. 52).

ing the construction of the “universal subject” as male),²¹ and the marginalization or virtual invisibility of women in biblical interpretation and the writing of Church history.²² The social and institutional process of silencing has been even more obvious as a target of critique – the perceived “silencing” of significant women during or after their lifetimes,²³ and the continuing contestation of the right of women to preach.²⁴

Critiques of the silencing of women sometimes, however, start from the paradoxical fact that women *do* appear in theological discourse – as mute objects of enquiry. Women are subjected to a “garrulous silencing” as well as a “dumb silencing;” and the garrulous silencing is considerably harder to overcome than the simple fact of exclusion. Again, as in Jüngel’s discussion, we can make a distinction between two forms of this garrulous silencing. On the one hand, women are constructed within a particular discourse as silent. Women’s “mysteriousness,” their “closeness to nature,” their “place in the home,” are aspects of the portrayal of women that contribute to their exclusion as speaking subjects.²⁵

Within theology, these and other attributes accentuated by Romanticism are combined with the biblical and traditional injunctions to silence and obedience, to produce a complex portrayal of the woman who is most truly a woman insofar as she remains silent.²⁶ Luce Irigaray’s words concerning psychoanalysis could equally have been said of theology – and,

²¹ On both of these see Letty M. Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective: A Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), pp. 93–103.

²² See Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 2nd edn. (London: SCM, 1994); Russell, *Human Liberation*, pp. 80–9.

²³ For an example of the feminist “rediscovery” of such women in Christian history, see Mary T. Malone, *Women and Christianity*, vol. 1 (Blackrock, Co. Dublin: Columba, 2000).

²⁴ For a detailed analysis of debates relating to the latter, see Anne E. Carr, *Transforming Grace* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), pp. 21–59. See also Nelle Morton, *The Journey Is Home* (Boston: Beacon, 1985), p. 40. A different example of the institutional “silencing” of women – through failures in pastoral care – is analyzed in Riet Bons-Storm, *The Incredible Woman: Listening to Women’s Silences in Pastoral Care and Counselling* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

²⁵ For summary discussions of this, see Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), pp. 25–31. Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance: A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy*, trans. Elizabeth Guild (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), pp. 123–32.

²⁶ For discussion of important recent examples of this, see Carr, *Transforming Grace*, pp. 50–1. See also on specific examples Rachel Muers, “The Mute Cannot Keep Silent: Barth, Von Balthasar and Irigaray on the Construction of Women’s Silence,” in Susan Frank Parsons, ed., *Challenging Women’s Orthodoxies in the Context of Faith* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

indeed, are developed in her discussions of Christianity: “[Woman’s life] is assigned within a discourse that excludes, and by its very “essence,” the possibility that it might speak for itself.”²⁷

In certain cases, women’s silence is apparently defined as the necessary condition for theological or ecclesiastical discourse itself; women are the hearers that theological speech requires as its necessary counterpart. Consider, for example, Kierkegaard’s address to “you, O woman” in *For Self-Examination*:

Let me describe for you such a woman, a hearer of the Word who does not forget the Word . . . she does not speak in the congregation, she is silent; neither does she talk about religion at home – she is silent . . . If, in observing the present state of the world and life in general . . . someone asked me “What do you think should be done?” I would answer, “. . . the very first thing that must be done is: create silence. God’s Word cannot be heard, and if in order to be heard in the hullabaloo it must be shouted deafeningly with noisy instruments, then it is not God’s Word; create silence!” . . . And that a woman can do.²⁸

There is no explicit reference here to the question of who *does* speak in the congregation, who is authorized to be a speaker of the Word, or indeed who is in a position to ask, concerning the present state of the world, “what should be done?” In addressing these observations to “you, O woman,” the author assumes and reinforces the assignation of this role to men; and he makes this explicit by informing any “woman” present that her primary task is to “create silence.”

Silencing women does not, however, depend on explicitly defining them as silent. The garrulous silencing of women, feminist thinkers have recognized, can occur when women are silenced simply by being talked about. Virginia Woolf’s famous description of a researcher’s foray into the British Library to investigate the question of “women and fiction” is an account of how this form of silencing was experienced, in particular, after

²⁷ Irigaray’s whole analysis of the silencing of women in both philosophy and Christianity is extremely significant. See Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), especially the “Epistle to the Last Christians;” and her critique of Fiorenza’s project for its failure to tackle this “garrulous silencing” (Luce Irigaray, “Equal to Whom?,” *differences*, 1, 2 (1989)). For a detailed analysis of this theme in her work, see Michelle Boulos Walker, “Silence and Reason: Women’s Voice in Philosophy,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 71, 4 (1993).

²⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), pp. 46–7. See for a more recent example Hans Urs von Balthasar, *New Elucidations*, trans. Mary Sherry (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), pp. 189–97.

the explosion of writing on the “Woman Question” from the late nineteenth century:

Have you any notion how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Have you any notion how many are written by men? Are you aware that you are, perhaps, the most discussed animal in the universe? . . . Merely to read the titles suggested innumerable schoolmasters, innumerable clergymen mounting their platforms and pulpits and holding forth with a loquacity which far exceeded the hour usually allotted to such discourse on this one subject. It was a most strange phenomenon; and apparently . . . one confined to the male sex. Women do not write books about men.²⁹

Woolf’s account suggests that the delimitation of woman as an object of study often appears to exclude from the outset the subject-position of a “speaking woman” – the woman who could “write books about men.” Having been determined as the spoken about, the written about, the “question,” or the “problem,” women have also been determined as those who cannot speak, write, set questions, or raise problems – determined, that is, as objects rather than possible subjects of this discourse.

Proposed responses to the silencing of women

How, in feminist theory, is the silence of women broken? Obviously the initial response will be very different in form or assumptions from the responses to the silencing of God, outlined above. Here as there, it is claimed that the act of silencing is based on, or perpetuates, a falsehood; the objects of silencing are in fact speakers. In the case of feminist thought, however, this claim is articulated from the position of the “object of silencing,” as she becomes or shows herself to be a “subject of speech.” It is, at least in the first instance, the silenced themselves who perform the critique of silencing, and, precisely in doing so, demonstrate that they can be speakers.³⁰

²⁹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (London: Penguin, 1945), pp. 27–8.

³⁰ For fuller taxonomies of feminist approaches from a historical perspective, on the basis of which the following overview is developed, see Alison M. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Brighton: Harvester, 1983); Rosemarie Putnam Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* (Oxford: Westview, 1998). For the contemporary debates, see Selya Benhabib, ed., *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (London: Routledge, 1995).

How does this work? The demand that women be recognized as speakers was already prominent in the first movements described as “feminist.” One set of feminist arguments³¹ has been based on minimizing or denying innate differences, as far as participation in public life or rational debate are concerned, between women and men. From this perspective, if women’s silence were to be broken – by removing impediments to their equal participation in any given forum of discussion or decision-making – all members of the community could take part in a democratic “conversation,” itself neutral and universally accessible.

The education and empowerment of women, in the liberal feminist project, is intended to enable them to fulfill their responsibilities in this sphere – to be able to speak and be heard among other rational speakers. The goal is to demonstrate that women are and have always been possible speaking subjects within any conversation presently taking place. In some cases, the “speech” of women might be presented as an end in itself – a necessity either for the health of the public sphere or for the verification of its claim to universality.³² In other cases the power of women to speak is linked with their power to demand justice – improvements in material conditions or the power of self-determination more generally. Silence, read as the exclusion of women from the public sphere, both is itself oppression and allows material oppression to remain concealed.

A recent rearticulation of this position can be seen in feminist appropriations of the communicative ethics of Jürgen Habermas, himself either praised or stigmatized for rearticulating a form of liberal humanism.³³

³¹ Referred to as “liberal feminism” in Jaggar, *Feminist Politics*, pp. 27–50; Tong, *Feminist Thought*, pp. 10–44. See also Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (London: SCM, 1983), p. 43. The term is associated in these works both with fin-de-siècle feminism and with that line of thought in “second wave” feminism that draws on liberal philosophical and political ideas. Daphne Hampson, particularly in her earlier work – Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) – is perhaps the clearest example of a feminist theologian who begins from this perspective. As her critics have noted, her objections to Christianity, albeit feminist in their articulation, are on a continuum with more widespread “liberal” objections. Janet Martin Soskice, “Response,” *Swallowing a Fishbone? Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity*, ed. Daphne Hampson (London: SPCK, 1996), pp. 125–8.

³² On this aspect of the liberal feminist project, see Jaggar, *Feminist Politics*, p. 39.

³³ Selya Benhabib is probably the most influential feminist reader of Habermas; see Selya Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992). Various issues in the feminist appropriation of Habermas are debated in Johanna Meehan, ed., *Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse* (London: Routledge, 1995). See also Iris M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 106–7. While I have here associated Habermas with “liberal” philosophy, it is important to note theological appropriations of

Commitment to the speech situation in which all participants have equal opportunity to demand the “discursive justification” – the giving of public reasons – for any claims made, and in which truth, appropriacy, and sincerity are recognized by all as the basic norms that structure dialogic interaction, seems to many feminist thinkers entirely coherent with their aims.

However, the perceived need, within this recent “liberal” feminism, to ask questions about the gendered particularity of the participants in discourse, points to a basic problem with the whole idea that women who begin to speak where they were previously silenced are simply joining a neutral or equalizing conversation.³⁴ An alternative feminist approach, which likewise has a long history,³⁵ begins from the assumption of women’s distinctiveness, biologically or otherwise determined. Women’s participation in speech then becomes a matter, not merely of equal recognition for basically equivalent speaking subjects, but of the articulation of something distinctive – perhaps through the appeal to a distinctive realm of “women’s experience.”

Clearly this difference may imply a different way of speaking – in Carol Gilligan’s terms, a “different voice.”³⁶ The question has arisen as to whether the rules of the conversation are established to exclude women’s speech, not merely through the construction of women as silent, but through the suppression of ways of speaking particularly associated with women. The perceived need to seek out separate institutional, practical, and theoretical spaces, within which the “voice” of women can be raised, arises from the analysis of the exclusion of women from mainstream

his thought that stress its eschatological tendency and, in doing so, distance it from “liberalism” on many interpretations of the term. See Nicholas Adams, “Imagining God’s Reign: Ideal Speech and Our Common Future,” PhD, University of Cambridge, 1997.

³⁴ See on this Jodi Dean, “Discourse in Different Voices” *Feminists Read Habermas* ed. Johanna Meehan (London: Routledge, 1995); and Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, pp. 9–13.

³⁵ Various interlocking terms are used to designate feminist theory that takes this approach – of which the best-known theological representative, again a self-described “post-Christian,” is Mary Daly (Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (London: Women’s Press, 1986)). Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, p. 44, refers to “romantic feminism” and “difference feminism.” Jaggar uses the term “radical feminism” (Jaggar, *Feminist Politics*, pp. 83–122), where Tong specifies those adopting an essentialist position as “radical-cultural” feminists (Tong, *Feminist Thought*, pp. 47–8). See also the discussion of “feminist essentialism” in Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, pp. 24–31. In recent years, as Jones’ discussion indicates, the debate over “essentialism” in Anglo-American feminism has been dominated by issues in the reception and interpretation of French feminist theorists such as Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray.

³⁶ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

discourse. If it turns out that the exclusion of women is built into the very structure (again, institutional, practical, or theoretical) of discourse, the possibility of women's speech can only arise in a location "outside" that structure.

The tension between these two approaches to "breaking the silence" has shaped many of the most important debates in feminist thought – and reflections of it can be found at all levels of discussion of feminist politics. Stay in this situation still shaped by sexist assumptions and try to bring about change from within, or leave and try to construct something different? Welcome women's progress in traditionally male institutions, or regret the support it gives to structures that are hopelessly patriarchal?³⁷

It is argued, on the one hand, that a focus on the distinctiveness of "speaking" (or theorizing, or acting ethically) "as a woman" reinforces the exclusion of women from those fora within which the power of speech is properly exercised. It creates a discourse that others can only hear as silence.³⁸ A voice speaking in ways that do not meet the normal criteria for admissible speech will be excluded from the outset. On the other hand, the attempt to speak with an "equal" voice can, it is claimed, serve simply to perpetuate the silencing of women's distinctive voices; the only women who are heard are those who speak like men.³⁹

The assumptions about speech and silence that shape this debate are, however, open to further challenges that fundamentally alter its parameters.

How to break the silence?

Both the feminist demand for justice or equality and the feminist affirmation of difference are based on the claim that the silencing of women is falsehood. Does this mean that women's speech – whether the speech of fully rational subjects of a common discourse, or of "different voices" – is "already there," waiting to be released into the public sphere from

³⁷ And, as the male chief executive asks the female worker in a cartoon by Jackie Fleming: "Which do you want, equality or maternity leave?"

³⁸ See Walker, "Silence and Reason," on the problems of Irigaray's attempt to speak "outside" philosophy.

³⁹ See Victoria Lee Erikson, *Where Silence Speaks: Feminism, Social Theory and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), p. 197: "People without speech are those people . . . who seek to speak to the masculine sacred machine in a language it recognizes . . . others, who resist being captured . . . from what the machine hears as silence. But they can hear themselves."

which it has been excluded? Feminist analysis suggests that this would be a problematic assumption to make.

Accounting for women's silencing involves describing the linguistic and discursive processes – the “rituals, etiquette” – by which that silencing has been effected. The more significant these processes are understood to be, however, the more difficult it becomes to see how the silence can be broken. If our identities, including our gender identities, are formed through speaking and being spoken to, the silencing of women is part of what makes them who they are – and what determines how they “speak.” The language within which women have attempted to speak is the same language that silenced them.⁴⁰ In Rich's words, silence in this case is not merely “a plan/rigorously executed” but “the blueprint for a life.”

An analysis of the process of silencing, then, leads to the disturbing recognition of women's complicity in that process. This is intensified and complicated by criticisms of the early feminist movement from those whom *it* silenced. Perhaps the greatest challenge to the whole idea of “feminism” has been the recognition that in its earlier forms the movement suppressed, by its own complex “technology” and “rituals,” the differences among women. A single “different voice” that claims to be the voice of women as such performs a silencing just as violent as those involved in the maintenance of a universal, supposedly gender-neutral subject. Lesbian women, Black women, “uneducated” women, and non-feminist women had been further silenced by a voice that claimed to speak for them; and feminist theologians had been just as much part of this silencing process as had theorists who made no theological claims.⁴¹

Where can the analysis and critique of women's silencing go, beyond the recognition that the critics themselves have been complicit both in their own silencing and that of others?

⁴⁰ Extended discussions of the complicity of the silenced in their own silencing, which relate this process to doctrines of sin, are in Alistair McFadyen, *Bound to Sin? Abuse, Holocaust and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) (see especially pp. 57–79 on the sexual abuse of children, and pp. 139–66 on feminist articulations of the sin of “sloth” as characteristic of women in patriarchy); Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, pp. 116–19.

⁴¹ See Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Sex, Race and God: Christian Feminism in Black and White* (London: Chapman, 1990); Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject: Women's Discourses and Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994). The work of bell hooks is particularly important in identifying the ways in which talk of “the Other” or “difference” in feminist theory can itself be used to silence white-dominated feminism's own “Other.” See bell hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness” in Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall, eds., *Women, Knowledge and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1996).

One significant move has been towards an emphasis on feminist theories and texts as strategic. If all women's speaking in the present is shaped by the discourses that silence women, the "different voice" is something to be hoped for rather than identified as a present and accessible reality. That hope gives rise to a task or project, in the shape of practices intended to allow the "different voice" to emerge. Theories of women's nature or women's language are read as provisional articulations of a possibility that still lies in the future, and as strategic moves towards its realization.⁴² If there is going to be new or different speech, it has to be learned.

Insofar as the possibility of a "different voice," or the space within which it can be heard or articulated,⁴³ is described in feminist theory, the descriptions are often future-oriented, "utopian," written as dreams or hopes; they set out not what *is* being said, but where and how something *could* be said. Precisely because, not only the exclusion of women as speaking subjects, but the history and form of women's silence, has been determined within a patriarchal framework, the nature of the "different voice" cannot be predicted. Perhaps, as Luce Irigaray's work suggests, sexual difference itself should be understood as a future promise rather than a present reality; we do not yet know, culturally, what it would mean for there to be women who were not constructed as the mirror-image of men.⁴⁴ Recent feminist epistemologies emphasize how early feminist work provides insights into the partiality of all knowledge – and thus transcends its own limitations, undermining by implication all claims to speak "for" or "of" women.⁴⁵

⁴² Jones' discussion of "strategic essentialism" (Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, pp. 42–8, 51–5) indicates the congeniality of this approach, in the eyes of many feminist theologians, for Christian theology. For Jones, the feminist theological appropriation of strategic essentialism (which could apply to various forms of "strategic" feminist practice) is "rooted decisively in a theological vision of an already/not-yet future."

⁴³ Clearly the language of "space" here is itself problematic, insofar as it implies that a stable subject position is a prerequisite for the possibility of speech. Judith Butler and others arguing from her Foucauldian premises would reject the implication that there could be any source of resistance to a discourse not produced by the discourse itself. As I explain at more length below (chapter 2), I am retaining the concept of a subject or agent – a "Who" – in communicative acts, but am privileging understandings of communicative agency that do not make this "subject" sovereign or self-sufficient.

⁴⁴ For this reading of Irigaray, put forward to counter the early interpretation of her as an "essentialist," see Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989); Margaret Whitford, "Irigaray, Utopia and the Death Drive," in Carolyn Burke, ed., *Engaging with Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

⁴⁵ As discussed in Elizabeth Karmack Minnich, *Transforming Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), pp. 147–75.

Feminist writing does not only describe the strategies that might begin the process of learning, or creating space for, a different way of speaking; it exemplifies these strategies in different ways. Sometimes the move is stylistic – styles that emphasize incompleteness, perhaps calling the reader to participate in the “completion” of the text, as Michèle Le Doeuff does in the introduction to her “Essay concerning Women, Philosophy, etc.”: “The aim of an introduction is . . . to make contact with whoever is going to read and ask for that person’s tolerance and goodwill, in other words for voluntary help . . . Texts are written in anxious intersubjectivity.”⁴⁶

Sometimes the imaginative construction or reconstruction of “female” societies, religions, or philosophies is used, not as a claim about how things are, but as a challenge to the projected self-evidence of dominant voices.⁴⁷ Feminist science-fiction novels, or accounts of matriarchal religions or societies, are used not simply as programmatic statements or pieces of “objective” history. They work to challenge the reader’s assumptions about what is necessary or possible, and hence to create the space in which more different ways of being or speaking can be imagined. In opposition to discursive practices that seek to define the limits of speech (*Wovon man nicht sprechen kann* . . .), these approaches to reading, writing, and speaking seek to stretch existing limits. That “whereof we cannot speak” becomes, in effect, that “whereof we cannot speak *yet*.” Not just the content, but the rules and patterns of speech, are being challenged.

The critiques of early feminism, that highlight its tendency to exclude or minimize the diversity of women’s lives and experiences, also highlight a failure to “change the rules.” Breaking the silence, it has been claimed, produced either the substitution of one monologue for another, or a cacophony of competing voices within which there was no guarantee that any of the new voices will be heard – and within which the defeat of some of the voices was inevitable.⁴⁸ Feminism, at least in its Western academic contexts, learned from the critiques described above about the need to examine its own “technology of silence . . . rituals, etiquette.”

⁴⁶ Michèle Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia’s Choice*, trans. Trista Selous (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 47.

⁴⁷ See for an important analysis of recent feminist writing in these terms Susan Sargisson, *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism* (London: Routledge, 1996). Sargisson argues that feminist writing (including the work of Cixous and Irigaray as well as various examples of feminist fiction) both inhabits and extends the category of “utopia” by forming visions of alternative cultural or political spaces that are themselves “imperfect” or hold a range of possibilities in tension.

⁴⁸ On feminist theology’s own acts of silencing, see especially Angela West, *Deadly Innocence: Feminism and the Mythology of Sin* (London: Cassell, 1995).

Silencing, then, within feminist thought as well as outside it, has to be analyzed from a position of complicity. The demands of justice and of the recognition of “different voices” have to be seen from this perspective. Practices of communication, and the assumptions about speech and silence they carry, need to be subjected to critical interrogation – but with an awareness of one’s own location within those practices of communication.

In contemporary feminist texts, then, the end of silencing emerges as a hope that shapes a process – the process of the critique of a given communicative situation and its assumptions, and of the experimental reconfiguration of that situation. The process demands and furthers the “conversion” of those who participate in it; its consequences are not fully predictable, and its conditions not open to specification. It is on these terms that conflicting demands, such as those of “justice for all” and “the affirmation of difference” must be worked out.

Theologians concerned with the feminist project find, in these moves, indications of eschatological thinking. Feminism calls for thought about the *telos* of human existence, as that which emerges out of a future not within the control of those who now look toward it, but as that which nonetheless demands ethical commitment and action in the present.⁴⁹ Feminist thought about the silencing of women puts to theology the question of the relationship between ethics and eschatology – of the relationship between the sense of movement into an open future which is in some sense “given,” and the action demanded now. In response, theologians can put to feminist writers the question of the basis of hope; what are the conditions of possibility for the kind of future-oriented communicative action advocated and practiced in feminist writing? Even the deliberate avoidance of closure in communication will already, by the way it is enacted, imply normative claims about the source or nature of the “more” to which it remains open.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ It is noteworthy that Butler and Irigaray, as two significant representatives of different “strategic” approaches to the theorizing of gender difference (behind which lie, of course, subtly different accounts of “silencing”), have both attracted interest from theologians precisely on the grounds of their implicit eschatologies. On Irigaray, Fergus Kerr, *Immortal Longings* (London: SPCK, 1997); Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, pp. 140–72; Tina Beattie, “Carnal Love and Spiritual Imagination: Can Luce Irigaray and John Paul II Come Together?,” in Jon Davies and Gerard Loughlin, eds., *Sex These Days: Essays on Theology, Sexuality and Society* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997). On Butler, see Sarah Coakley, “The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation and God,” *Modern Theology* 16, 1 (2000).

⁵⁰ Thus texts such as Jones’ that explicitly demand completion and critique from the reader’s exploration of feminism and Christianity (Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, pp. viii–ix) accord a certain primacy to narrated experience as source of

A theology that takes the feminist critique seriously needs to give an account of the basis on which the new ethic of communication, which this analysis of silencing seems to require, is put forward – and about the grounds for believing that its intention can be realized. This is the point at which the problem of the silencing of God – and the proposed solutions – intersects again with the multiple problems of the silencing of women and other “voices” – and the proposed solutions.

The Silencing of God and the Silencing of Women: Theological Issues

The power of speech

The similarities between the analyses of the “silencing of God” and of the “silencing of women” provide a useful starting-point for considering the specific challenges to theological understandings of communication that arise from feminist thought, and vice versa. I have suggested that the “dumb silencing” of God in modern atheism and the “garrulous silencing” perceived in certain theological approaches are mirrored in a “dumb” and a “garrulous” silencing of women. In both cases the silencing is perpetrated by a self-proclaimed single “voice of reason” that claims to determine its own scope and exclude whatever lay beyond it from coming to speech.

The approaches to speech and silencing discussed above share a basic assumption, so trivial that it barely needs to be mentioned: speech is powerful. I began with a consideration of the power to impose silence by speaking – silence being associated with exclusion, with the denial of freedom, and with powerlessness. Silence, as I have been discussing it, is the antithesis of the exercise of power, passive where speech is active; being silenced is having something done *to* one, and one resists it in the first instance by speaking.

The association of speech with activity and silence with passivity does not depend on any specific philosophical account of the nature of agency

emancipatory truth. The use of imagery related to the female body in Cixous and Irigaray, and the exploration of *écriture féminine*, implies by contrast a future way of “speaking” not compatible with existing genres such as narrative. Preliminary sketches of communicative environments within which women’s speaking might be possible – such as Fiorenza’s “ekklesia of wo/men” – likewise make implicit normative claims about the nature of future speech.

in speech, or of the fundamental purpose of speech. Strongly intentionalist models such as those implied in discussions of divine “authorship” of scripture; expressivist models that might support an account of women’s speech as the voicing of “different experience;” the world-disclosing capacity of language that the hermeneutic appropriated by Jüngel requires; or speech’s function of coordinating action in a shared world, as described by Habermas and others – all of them, as we have seen, can fit with an account of silence as “inactive.” So far, the only way we have seen to respond to the injunction in Rich’s poem, “Do not confuse [silence]/with any kind of absence” is to identify the “silenced” as a potential or actual speaker.

In the discussions of both the silencing of God and the silencing of women, however, a reshaping of the communicative environment was called for, to allow the excluded speech to be heard. Jüngel’s response to the silencing of God involved the redescription of the theologian, or more generally of humanity in relation to God, as the hearer of God’s speech. I noted, above, that this approach still works on the model of “powerful speech and passive silence.” On the other hand, the various strategies advocated and practiced in feminist writing, for allowing different voices to emerge, appear to mark out a discursive position that belongs neither to the silenced nor to the powerful speakers; a position from which the end of oppressive silencing is a hope and a task, rather than a demand corresponding to a present reality. Does this imply a form of communicative activity not exercised primarily through speaking – perhaps, even, a responsible or active silence; and how would this activity relate to God’s action?

God’s communication and our communication

With these questions in mind, I now turn to a consideration of the theological issues arising from the analysis of the silencing of women, in relation to the earlier analysis of the silencing of God.

The obvious point should perhaps be made first. Christian theology, and not only feminist theology, has long recognized the condition of enforced silencing as contrary to the redemption promised and enacted in Christ. Liberation from oppressive silencing is part of the good news.⁵¹

⁵¹ In commentaries on Luke’s Gospel, theologians from the patristic period onwards have linked the muteness of Zechariah with the “silence of the prophets” before John the Baptist. Speech was impossible before, but now through the coming of the incarnate Word and

The dumb spirits are cast out and the voiceless are given back their speech; if the disciples become mute, the stones themselves will lose their muteness and cry out.⁵² Christian feminist theology, from its earliest years, has belatedly claimed this promise of the Gospel for women. Attention has been drawn repeatedly to the muting of women within the Churches and within academic theology. In recent years attention to liberation theology, Black theology, Jewish responses to earlier Christian theology, and other recognizably “different voices” has forced the Western theological academy – including, as we have seen, academic feminist theology – to acknowledge and repent of such acts of silencing. Our question is not whether acts of oppressive silencing – other than the “silencing of God” – should be a concern for theology, but rather how this concern should be carried forward.⁵³

The particular responsibility for feminist theology, suggested by the discussion above, is to maintain the memory – and awareness of the continuing possibility – of being silenced while being aware of one’s own acts of silencing others. I suggested, above, that the end of silencing was regarded in feminist thought as a hope rather than a given fact, and that the need to give an account of this hope was the starting point for theological engagement with the issue. I now suggest, on the basis of the discussion so far, some requirements for an adequate theological account of the hope for an end to silencing.

A theological ethics of communication will require an account of God’s free, prevenient, and loving action as the basis for human communication. This requirement arises both from the critique of the “silencing of God” and from the eschatological orientation of feminist reflection on communication, explored at the end of the previous section. However, that account must, to take full account of the feminist critique, include a more

through the Holy Spirit which gives the power of speech, creation has been given back its voice. (See on this Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, vol. 2, 2 vols. (Bonn: Hanstein, 1986), pp. 63–5.)

⁵² Mk 9:17ff. & pars; Lk 19:40.

⁵³ Clearly it would be unsatisfactory – thus a common argument against all forms of “liberation theology” runs – to make this the sole *criterion* for theology. “The morally unquenchable longing that the murderer should not triumph over his innocent victim . . . has something to do with God only on the presupposition of God. To construct a God for that is unworthy of God.” (Jüngel, *God as the Mystery*, p. 343, n. 45). To put the question in terms of *silencing*, however, is to draw attention to the fact that the “construction” (and hence the silencing) of God by overconfident human speech is not the only possible failure of theology. Theology itself can become complicit in the triumph of the murderer over the victim, and to ignore this is no less “unworthy of God.”

complex view of God's communicative action than the model of "powerful speech" appears to allow.

The attempt to restore to theology its acknowledgment of God as a speaker sits ill with many aspects, not only of feminist thought in general, but of feminist theology. What is the silence of God, after all, it might be claimed, but the long-awaited silence of the voice of mystifying male authority, that had itself silenced the voices of women, and of countless others who can now speak from the margins?

Even for theological appropriations of the feminist critique, it might be claimed that what is needed is not a return to understanding humanity as "hearers of the Word" – which has, after all, been a gendered category. To reaffirm God as a speaker would be to reaffirm a model of divine action and authority associated with patriarchy. Do we not require, rather – thus the possible challenge from feminist theology – the reaffirmation of the human capacity to name God in many ways according to the plurality of human circumstances, stories, and desires?⁵⁴ The silence of God becomes the precondition for the liberation of human speech about God.⁵⁵

The content and limitations of speech about God is determined, on this model, not by a depersonalized and monological "reason" but by many historically situated "voices." But this, from the point of view of Jüngel and the approach he represents, perpetuates the "garrulous silencing" of God. This account of how liberation from silencing takes place in theological discourse can look like another version of "speaking about God by speaking about humanity in a loud voice" – or in several loud voices. It appears to require or imply a God who, or which, is less than personal – who has no capacity for communicative action. Moreover, the implication that the speech of God competes with human speech is theologically problematic. Whatever the account of divine speech introduced

⁵⁴ Thus, in different ways, Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age* (London: SPCK, 1987); Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); Paula Cooley, *Religious Imagination and the Body: A Feminist Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). For the latter two thinkers in particular, the re-naming or re-imagining of God becomes a key aspect of feminist "strategy" – naming God is both itself part of women's "speaking in a different voice" and one of the acts that makes such speaking possible. See also Luce Irigaray, "Divine Women?," in Garry and Pearsall, eds., *Women, Knowledge and Reality*.

⁵⁵ A particularly clear example of this is Isabel Carter Heyward, *The Redemption of God* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1982), pp. 96–100, who uses Elie Wiesel's pronouncements on God's silence as prolegomena to her defense of a theology of divine immanence (and hence of a plurality of names for God arising out of the struggle for "right relation").

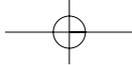
to break God's silence, it must not – and in most cases does not – make God a power among powers in the world. For Jünger, as we have seen, the world-constituting character of divine speech means that it is the basis of all creaturely freedom – including the freedom to speak a response to God.

So – we cannot attach weight to the simple claim that the recognition of God as primary speaker per se denies the plurality or the freedom of human speech. We can, however, further refine the feminist challenge to the theology of divine speech, to put questions that carry more weight. Feminist thought in general, and theology in particular, has, as we have seen, placed great importance on recognizing, and speaking in, one's "own voice." Liberation is from the condition in which one cannot speak (in a voice that does not reproduce the voices that silence one's own). The struggle to "find a voice" – however this process of "finding" is conceptualized – in turn forces one to recognize that voice's partiality, alongside the partiality of the quasi-monological voices that silenced it.

For feminist theology, to re-pristiniate the idea of an authoritative primary speech of God that constitutes the hearer and the world is to raise the question: who is given authority to "speak after" this primary speech? Whose discourse does it authorize, and whose does it exclude? The suspicion arises that theology claiming to "speak after" God is attempting to conceal the theologian's voice, and hence to conceal the silencing of other voices by claiming to speak for all.⁵⁶ It does not indicate how to develop a theological ethic of communication that accepts responsibility for the hearing or silencing of different voices. It does not allow a theological account to be given of the hope for liberation from silencing and the practices that enact and sustain that hope. More generally, it does not in itself allow a theological challenge to the assumption that activity in communication is associated with speech, and silence with passivity.

"[Silence] is a presence/it has a history a form/Do not confuse it/with any kind of absence." I suggested in an earlier section that the challenge of the apophatic tradition to the theology of the speech of God might be the recognition that our understandings of speech and silence are themselves limited. Do we need to understand silence – the silence of God or human silence – as chosen or enforced inactivity? Is there, perhaps, a "form" of silence that enables us better to understand our responsibility

⁵⁶ See on this Mary Grey, *The Wisdom of Fools? Seeking Revelation for Today* (London: SPCK, 1993), pp. 26–7; "the Christian tradition needs to reflect on the sociological status of 'Word' as such and its connection with power and status. The question is, who proclaims the word and who decides on its content?"



for the recognition – or our complicity in the silencing – of different voices? The next chapter will look, first within feminist theology itself, and then more broadly in the “philosophy of listening,” in the attempt to uncover such a form of silence and show its possible importance for theology.

