

## 7 Silence and Good Language Habits

**Summary** 7.1 Silence and Listening. – 7.2 Curbing the Tongue. – 7.3 Imprisonment and Preventive Detention. – 7.4 Silence and Intelligence.

When discussing the components of goodness or *ḥilm*, we have seen that our various authors have not hesitated to include silence among the highest qualities of the good Muslim. In so doing, they usually appeal to such aphorisms as ‘he who has compassion receives compassion and he who is silent keeps himself safe and sound’ or ‘silence is itself an answer’. Or to verses of poetry, like “when the fool speaks do not answer | silence is the best retort”: this, again, from the early scholar Ibn Abī l-Dunyā in his *Book of Judiciousness*.<sup>1</sup>

Now, the inclusion of silence among the values of Islam was by no means a given, in so far as we are speaking of a culture that has always put a high value on words, right from its founding text, the Qur’ān, which boasts an eloquence that reproduces the talk of God – as it frequently says of itself.<sup>2</sup> Later Arabic literature also shows an unshakeable faith in the word, to which it attributes a solid operational capability and even a redemptive values – as in the well-known case of Scheherazade in the *Thousand and One Nights*.<sup>3</sup> Hand in hand with this high regard for speech, there is a documented disdain for silence, even bitter condemnation of it when it is a question of responding to the great Qur’ānic imperative “enjoin what is good and forbid evil” (Qur’ān III,104, 110 and 114; VII,157; IX,71 and 112; XXII,41; XXXI,17), the principle that underpins both Islamic morals and politics. The imagery of the Tradition also contains the figure of the ‘mute devil’ (*shayṭān akhras*

<sup>1</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1413/1993, 34.

<sup>2</sup> On the relationship between the spoken word and silence in comparison with other monotheistic religions, cf. the interesting reflections of Ventura (*Il Corano* 2010, “Introduzione”, LII).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. also Gherseti 2010.

(شيطان أخرس), a personification of *omertà*, withholding the truth, taken up by, among others, the Ḥanbalī theologian and jurist Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya in his *I'lām al-muwaqqi'īn 'an rabb al-'ālamīn* or 'Information for Those who Write on Behalf of the Lord of the Worlds':

What religion, what good could there ever be in one who sees God's commands violated [...] and remains cold in heart and silent in tongue? He is a mute devil. Just as he who speaks falsely is a speaking devil.<sup>4</sup>

A negative perception of silence is already to be found in the Qur'ān, which is, incidentally, not much interested in distinguishing silence by choice from pathological or necessity-driven muteness: for example, the prophet Zechariah remains silent for three days after doubting the divine good tidings (Qur'ān III,41; XIX,10), and Mary mother of Jesus remains silent, perhaps for the same reason or perhaps because of a vow she has imposed on herself (XIX,26); in Abraham's dealings with the idolaters, silence, or the inability to speak, defines the false gods (XXI,63-5; XXXVII,92); and in the sura *al-Mu'minūn* 'The Believers', it is ordained for the damned because they have failed to believe in the Qur'ān, the word of truth:

Were not My communications recited to you but you rejected them as lies? They will reply: – Lord, our misfortunes overwhelmed us and we were a people led astray. Our Lord, bring us forth out of here! [...]. He will say: – Remain despised therein and do not speak to Me. (Qur'ān XXIII,105-8)

## 7.1 Silence and Listening

The only occasions on which the Book of Islam praises silence, bringing in the ethical dimension and making silence a quality of the good believer, is when it is adopted for listening to the Book's own contents.<sup>5</sup> For example, in the sura *al-A'rāf* 'The Heights', it is an indispensable ingredient of commendable behaviour: "Whenever the Qur'ān is recited, listen to it quietly so that you may receive mercy" (Qur'ān VII,204).

Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, in his *Compendious Discourse*, provides a good commentary on this passage. It teaches, he says, that the Muslim, when he hears the Book recited, should not talk over it but bend his ear to understanding its verses as well as he can, to comprehend it and ponder it, and to consider its lessons. An apparently obvious explanation which, nonetheless, in its repeated insistence on applying one's intelligence to the Text and pondering it, urges above all the good use of the intellect; and conversely frames the human word as a distracting intrusion. Al-Ṭabarī cites in support various accounts of the historical occasions to which the revelation of the passages he examines responded, and in so doing immerses the reader in the everyday world of 'the pious ancestors', in the small, even dull events that make up the life of a community. He recalls, in

<sup>4</sup> Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya 1411/1991, 2: 121.

<sup>5</sup> The Arabic language, with its wealth of terminology, has three major roots expressing silence: *ṣ-m-t*, from which *ṣamt* and *ṣumūt*; *s-k-t*, from which *sukūt*; and *n-ṣ-t*. Only the last has moral weight, and appears in the Qur'ān twice, always in the imperative plural (*anṣitū*).

fact, how in the Prophet's time there were those who, during communal prayer, chatted about their own affairs and greeted acquaintances, those who became aroused and noisy at the mere mention of heaven or hell, and those who, arriving late at the ritual, asked others at what point they were and how much longer before the end. And there was the odd one who, out of enthusiasm and/or exhibitionism, would loudly recite the words of the imam, the prayer leader, in unison, overpowering his voice and creating embarrassment. This verse, therefore, enjoins silence both during the recitation of the Qur'ān and while the imam is preaching; as 'Aṭā' Ibn Abī Rabāḥ (d. c. 114/732), an early Meccan jurist, advised, "silence is obligatory in two things: when reciting the Qur'ān while praying, and when the imam recites it when preaching".<sup>6</sup>

The idea that silence goes hand in hand with listening and also with knowing and understanding the essentials of faith reappears in the Qur'ān in the sura *al-Aḥqāf* 'The Curved Sand-hills': "Remember when We sent you a company of jinn to hear the Qur'ān; and when they were in its presence, they said to one another: – Be silent!" (XLVI,29). And here the commentators all go off on a tangent, imagining readers' many queries and answering them from the Prophetic Tradition, frequently relying on Ibn 'Abbās (d. c. 68/687), 'the father of Qur'ānic exegesis': where was the Prophet while he was reciting, and where were the jinn? By a palm tree. How many of them were there? Fewer than ten, nine perhaps. Where did they come from? From the heavens, having been chased from there by flaming stars (cf. XV,18). Were they invisible? They were. Then how could the Prophet know they were there? Muḥammad was aware of them through divine inspiration. And what did the jinn do when they had finished listening? Perhaps they became prophets to their fellows and preached Islam. And so on. When the exhortation to silence is finally examined, there are those who translate it into a prosaic 'shhh!', those who explain that what the jinn renounced at that point was their particular way of speaking made up of murmurs and innuendos, and those who dwell on the cognitive aspect of silence and listening: the jinn knew that they would not understand the Qur'ān if they did not keep quiet and listen.

The idea that silence is linked to listening, and is therefore conducive to intellectual refinement, functions well as a key to understanding the Prophetic and the more generally ecstatic experience on which Islamic culture rests. It is dealt with, to cite just one example, by Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī in his *The Nourishment of Hearts*, something of a handbook of Sufism, where the author teaches that silence is one of the four mainstays of the postulant together with hunger, wakefulness and isolation; that it is an adornment in the wise and a blemish on the ignorant; and that on its own it forms half of wisdom ('ilm), the other half being knowing when to employ it.<sup>7</sup>

## 7.2 Curbing the Tongue

In Islamic culture, the literature on silence, or rather on the rules of speech and the broader disciplining of language, puts before the believer the great models of the past, starting of course with the Prophet himself and his conduct as handed down by the Tradition. The best known and also the most

<sup>6</sup> Al-Ṭabarī 1412/1992, commentary on Qur'ān VII,204.

<sup>7</sup> Al-Makki 1426/2005, 1: 169-77.

substantial work is *Al-ṣamt wa-ādāb al-lisān* or ‘Silence and Etiquette of the Tongue’ by an author we have already consulted several times, the traditionalist and moralist Ibn Abī l-Dunyā of Baghdad.<sup>8</sup>

This work, like his others, is entirely composed of stories from the Tradition, offered without commentary, where the characters, settings, and even registers – from the grave and solemn to the shrewd and witty – come and go haphazardly, with a good deal of repetition. But as we read on it becomes clear that Ibn Abī l-Dunyā’s concern is always the same: to arrange the stories as unpredictably as possible, to keep his readers on their toes.

There are several hundred of these tales and they have to do with the Prophet and other prominent figures from the dawn of Islam, the Companions or the caliphs dear to didactic literature, but also to other luminaries of sacred history, first and foremost Jesus, who frequently figures,<sup>9</sup> or Moses, Ishmael, Solomon, David, Adam, or the wise Luqmān. Amidst his potpourri of material, Ibn Abī l-Dunyā discusses the excellence of silence and the impropriety of indiscretion, the wickedness of telling lies, of duplicity, of denigrating the absent and of slander, but also quarrels and disputes, words in defence of one’s brethren, punctilious speech, derision, adulation, obscenities, and much more. The work begins, appropriately enough, with the Prophet’s silence as recalled by a notable from Mecca.

I asked: – Messenger of God, tell me about Islam. I will not ask anyone but you on the subject.

He replied: – Recite out loud ‘I believe in God’ and keep to the straight path.

– And what should I beware of? – I then asked.

He pointed at his tongue.<sup>10</sup>

Ibn Abī l-Dunyā values silence as a religious duty. On this, another saying of Muḥammad’s stands out: “Whoever believes in God and the Last Day, speak well or keep silent” – which the author goes so far as to quote twice almost consecutively, in two parallel versions.<sup>11</sup> He attributes substantially similar words to Jesus as well; the apostles asked:

– Tell us what we should do to enter into paradise.

He answered: – Refrain from speaking altogether.

They protested: – But we are not able to do that.

– Then speak only the good – he said.<sup>12</sup>

Again on the importance of silence for good religious practice, there is a testimony by Ibn Jabal (d. 18/639), a Companion of the Prophet:

I asked: – Messenger of God, will we be punished for what we say?

<sup>8</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989.

<sup>9</sup> On the appearances of Jesus in the works of Ibn Abī l-Dunyā, I refer the reader to Khalidi 2003, 108-24.

<sup>10</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 47. Cf. Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, *musnad al-makkiyyīn*, no. 15112.

<sup>11</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 63. There is an extended version in Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-īmān*, no. 71.

<sup>12</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 66.

He exclaimed: – May your mother be bereaved of you! Do you think men are cast into hell, their noses to the ground, for anything other than the harvest of their tongues?<sup>13</sup>

Unlike the exegetical literature, moral literature emphasises the social alongside the strictly religious aspect: the discipline of speech is recommended to the believer as a way of pleasing God and therefore potentially leading to heaven, particularly because it is also pleasing to one's neighbour, like kindness or hospitality. Silence, then, lies especially in refraining from scandalmongering and other forms of verbal offence, including unsolicited and uncalled-for speech, and even irritating or complaining speech, harping on one's own misfortunes:

A man's faith is not righteous unless his heart is righteous, and his heart is not righteous unless his tongue is righteous – the Prophet used to say – and no one enters heaven unless he has spared his neighbour the tale of his misfortunes.<sup>14</sup>

Sometimes stories trace a direct relationship between discipline of the tongue and hospitality. For example:

A desert Arab asked the Prophet: Tell me what I must do to enter paradise.

He replied: – Feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, encourage good and prevent evil, and if you are not able to do that, then always hold your tongue except when saying good words.<sup>15</sup>

A parallel theme is the relationship between silence and generosity: “Blessed is he who gives more money and speaks fewer words”, said the Prophet;<sup>16</sup> and again: “Hold back from saying ungenerous things to others: this is a donation [*ṣadaqa* صدقة] you can make to yourself”.<sup>17</sup> Accounts of this kind, combining the religious importance of silence with its social value, form the bulk of the material collected in *Silence and Etiquette of the Tongue* – and we are not talking here about a blanket ban on speech to which the true believer must subscribe, a sort of silence fast, but more of a generic guardianship or restraint of the tongue. There is an obvious similarity here with the maxim known all over the world “speech is silver but silence is golden”, which seems to have first appeared in Arabic literature – in two very similar versions, one from Ibn Abī l-Dunyā<sup>18</sup> and a slightly older but much more famous one from the celebrated littérateur al-Jāhīz (d. 255/868 or 869) of Basra.<sup>19</sup>

Another example is the following passage, whose protagonists are the Caliph Mu'āwiya and another icon of judiciousness, al-Aḥnaf al-Tamīmī (d. 67/686 or 687):

<sup>13</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 46-7; cf. Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, *musnad al-anṣār*, no. 21494.

<sup>14</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 48.

<sup>15</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 72. There is a longer version in al-Bukhārī 1409/1983, no. 69.

<sup>16</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 43.

<sup>17</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 68. There is an extended version in Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-imān*, no. 122.

<sup>18</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 66.

<sup>19</sup> Al-Jāhīz 1381/1961, 194. Cf. Wasserstein 1999, 247-9.

There was conversation in Mu'āwiya's house, God rest his soul, and al-Aḥnaf was always silent.

- What is the matter with you that you don't speak? - they asked him.

He replied: - If I speak falsehood I fear God, if I speak the truth, I fear you.<sup>20</sup>

Similar is another aphorism, echoing the Qur'ānic silence in order to listen better: "Silence provides a man with two good things at the same time: one is the integrity of his religion, the other is understanding what his companion is saying".<sup>21</sup>

### 7.3 Imprisonment and Preventive Detention

Clearly, as far as the moral literature is concerned, silence always has a positive value while speech can be both good and evil, even at the same time. On this, Ibn Abī l-Dunyā has another of the Prophet's sayings: "The most beautiful thing and the ugliest thing that all of you possess is between your jaws, and that is your tongue".<sup>22</sup> On the same track are the following stories of the 'rightly guided' (*rāshidūn* راشدون) caliphs, the Prophet's immediate successors as heads of the Muslim community:

'Umar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb saw Abū Bakr sticking out his tongue.

- What are you doing, Caliph of the Messenger of God? - he asked him. The other replied: - This one has given me a good deal of trouble: God's Messenger himself said that there is no other part of the body that does not complain to God about the sharp tip of the tongue.<sup>23</sup>

'Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib said that the tongue leads the body and as long as it keeps straight the other members will do likewise, but if it runs amok no part of the body can stand up to it.<sup>24</sup>

Reading these accounts, it is difficult not to think of the New Testament's *Letter to James* (3,2-8):

If anyone does not make a mistake with his tongue by saying the wrong things, he is a perfect man. It shows he is able to make his body do what he wants it to do. We make a horse go wherever we want it to go by a small bit in its mouth. We turn its whole body by this. [...]. The tongue is also a small part of the body, but it can speak big things. See how a very small fire can set many trees on fire. The tongue is a fire. It is full of wrong. It poisons the whole body. The tongue sets our whole lives on fire with a fire that comes from hell. Men can make all kinds of animals and birds and fish and snakes do what they want them to do. But no man

<sup>20</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 70, on the authority of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī.

<sup>21</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 69.

<sup>22</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 70. This saying is poorly attested; nonetheless, cf. al-Bustī, *Ṣaḥīḥ* no. 5835.

<sup>23</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 50.

<sup>24</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 69.

can make his tongue say what he wants it to say. It is sinful and does not rest. It is full of poison that kills.

But let us return to Ibn Abī l-Dunyā, and his continuing teaching on the great care that needs to be taken of the tongue, “more even than the place where you set your foot”, as one sage put it,<sup>25</sup> and not so much because it is an asset to be protected as because it is an evil to be kept at bay. In this connection, Ibn Abī l-Dunyā passes on an ironic if not jaundiced comment, based on the idea that human utterances, for the most part to be counted among their bad actions, do not go unnoticed by the recording angels: “If men were the ones compiling records of their deeds, they would speak little”.<sup>26</sup>

Given the word’s potential for mischief, its custody can easily be understood as a necessary concealment, an imprisonment even. And this, predictably enough, brings the interdictions of language back to those of sexuality, so that inappropriate speech can even link directly to the sin of adultery (*zinā* زنا), sometimes in very crude terms: “The Messenger of God said: – Whoever can vouch for what he has between his jaws and what he has between his legs, I will guarantee him paradise”.<sup>27</sup> Or:

They asked the Messenger what is the thing that most gets people into heaven.

He answered: – The fear of God [*taqwā*] and goodness of character.

They asked him what is the thing that most gets people into hell.

He answered: – The two cavities, the vagina and the mouth.<sup>28</sup>

No less strong, in *Silence and Etiquette of the Tongue*, is the association of words with animals, which turns controlling one’s tongue into preventive detention. An anonymous sage stated: “My tongue is a ferocious beast, and if I let it loose, I fear it will maul me”.<sup>29</sup> Similar are: “Your tongue is a powerful dog, and if you let it get the better of you, it will devour you”,<sup>30</sup> and a declaration from the Companion Ibn Mas‘ūd (d. 33/653): “I swear by God, there is no God but Him: nothing needs long imprisonment like the tongue”.<sup>31</sup>

#### 7.4 Silence and Intelligence

The material collected by Ibn Abī l-Dunyā also highlights the relationship between silence and the exercise of the intellect. He ascribes, for example, to the ‘wisdom of the Family of David’ the following definition of an intelligent person: he is one who recognises the opportune moment, guards his tongue, and minds his own business.<sup>32</sup> Among the early Muslims, the author

<sup>25</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 60.

<sup>26</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 66.

<sup>27</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 43-4.

<sup>28</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 45. This story is repeated by among others Ibn Māja, *Sunan, kitāb al-zuhd*, no. 4244.

<sup>29</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 63.

<sup>30</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 67.

<sup>31</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 53.

<sup>32</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 60.

again cites Caliph ‘Umar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb – “he who speaks much, errs much”<sup>33</sup> and also al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī: “He who does not guard his tongue has not understood his religion”.<sup>34</sup>

This intelligent silence can take on a sense of refractoriness to others, if their usual discourses are futile and mundane: “It has been said that wisdom [*ḥikma*] has ten parts, nine parts lie in silence and the tenth is standing apart from the crowd”.<sup>35</sup> And here it is not a question of shunning the world but of better inhabiting the world through an educated understanding of its rules, as demonstrated by the example of the Prophet and the pious ancestors. On this theme, Ibn Abī l-Dunyā offers an account of one such, featuring the well-known ascetic and mystic Ibrāhīm Ibn Adham (d. 161/778), also celebrated in other Islamic literatures for his wisdom and moral stature:

Ibrāhīm Ibn Adham would remain silent for a long time and then, when he spoke, he would not stop.

On a certain day he had been silent for a good while, so I said to him: – Suppose you were to speak?

He answered: – There are four kinds of speech. One is the speech from which you hope for some advantage but at the same time you fear harm, so avoiding it means avoiding that harm. Another is the speech from which you do not fear harm but neither do you hope for an advantage, so avoiding it is of little consequence, either to the body or to the tongue. Still another is the speech from which you do not hope for an advantage and from the harm of which you are not sure you will escape; and that is enough for the intelligent person. Finally, there is the speech from whose harm you are sure to escape and from which you hope for an advantage; well, that alone is the speech you should practice.<sup>36</sup>

The following is similar to the above, but remarkable in that it extends the appreciation of silence to other cultures, and proposes it, in a secularized or at least religiously neutral version, as a universally shared value:

Four kings met together, and they challenged each other to deliver a single speech. They were the king of India, the king of China, the Persian Khosrow and the Roman Caesar.

The first said: – I regret what I have said but do not regret what I do not say.

The second: – When I speak, the words rule me and not I them.

The third: – I am amazed by those who speak when their words come back to bite them, or if not that, when they bring them no benefit.

The fourth: – I answer better for what I have not said than for what I have said.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 68.

<sup>34</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 61.

<sup>35</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 62.

<sup>36</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 67.

<sup>37</sup> Ibn Abī l-Dunyā 1410/1989, 71.