

[Essays in Medieval Studies 2](#)

[Page numbers of the printed text appear at the right in bold. Works cited appear at the end of this file.]

page 168

Philip of Harveng on Silence
Paul F. Gehl

I want to open, or reopen, the book today on an important but little-read figure in the history of twelfth-century spirituality, Philip of Harveng. Philip has been recognized as an important figure in the flowering of spiritualist writing among lay canons and as one of the saner and calmer participants in the mid-century controversy over the relative status of monastic and clerical vocations. Still, by 1146 even the mild-mannered Philip had so provoked the ire of St. Bernard of Clairvaux over a dispute concerning a fugitive monk that he was censured and exiled by the synod of Tournai.

Unfortunately for our modern understanding of Philip, and clerical spirituality more generally, his works have almost always been read as if they were only a part of the controversy with Bernard or of the larger but still narrow question of monastic-clerical tensions. In fact, Philip was the one party to these disputes who repeatedly proved able to rise above them. He wrote calmly, copiously, and vigorously for over thirty years about spiritual themes of concern to his own order of Premonstratensian canons.

The most recent and extensive treatment of his work is that of Caroline Walker Bynum, who discusses Philip's massive collection of essays on clerical life (*De institutione clericorum*) both in her dissertation book, *Docere verbo et exemplo*, and in her more recent *Jesus as Mother*. Bynum is less

page 169

concerned with Philip as a controversialist than earlier critics but she does treat him primarily as an example of the clerical party and as a writer devoted to developing a new, non-monastic spirituality. As such she misses, I think, some important ways in which his work is deeply rooted in monastic spiritual thought. I'd like to discuss briefly Philip's longest and most original work, *On clerical silence*, as an example of what I mean.

On clerical silence is one of the essays usually considered part of Philip's longer work *De institutione clericorum*. In fact the *De Silentio* is a free-standing treatise, only loosely linked to the earlier essays, like the *De clericorum* which precedes it in the standard edition. By contrast, the first three essays are a single unit, *On the dignity of clerics* (knowledge, justice and chastity are included). The treatise *On silence* is also unique among Philip's works for its extreme length, 261 columns in the *PL*, more than twice the length of any other of Philip's rather verbose writings. It is also the longest work by any author on the popular monastic subject of silence. I am providing an outline of the work to make it clearer what Philip is up to.

Several major themes are sounded in the prefaces to *De institutione clericorum* that are pertinent. First, Philip's critical stance is *expressly* non-controversial; he says there is a long-standing argument between monks and clerks and says he is not addressing it, that he intends his remarks to be taken only of clerics. This is important in reading *On silence* because it opens with a brief address on the joys of the cloistered life of silence.

page 170

We could mistake this for a monastic treatise if we had not been explicitly reminded otherwise.

A second important theme sounded in all of Philip's works also bears upon the *De silentio*, and that is his insistence that scriptural learning alone is of use to the Christian. All wisdom is contained in scripture; its understanding is the task of a lifetime; and therefore no other form of study is worth the effort. This goes far to explain the form *On silence* takes. For, although the ostensible subject, silence, is elaborately subdivided in what seems scholastic fashion (see outline), not one of the numerous categories receives a full and proper definition. Instead a one-line explanation is offered for each and then a series of biblical examples are given. The reader must work very hard to derive the real meaning of the category from these diffusely described and loosely linked examples. Ultimately, the categories serve primarily to group the related biblical texts and provide a sequence to the meditations on each. Silence becomes a term for whatever it is in scripture meditation which provides cloistered peace and contemplative grace to the clerk.

This brings us very close to the internal logic of the treatise on silence and of much of the rest of Philip's writing. For the non-monk, reading and study the classic monastic labors of silence are the source of an interior life which ultimately serves the pastoral vocation of the cleric. To some degree non-monastic study is limited and restricted, at least by the standards of traditional monastic usage, because the cleric

page 171

has fewer quiet hours and less freedom to make lengthy investigations of learned subjects. But both the obligation to study scripture and its animating value in Christian life remain. Study of this sort animates and informs every moral choice. It is these choices that Philip characterizes as silence or silences in his great compendium.

Philip's approach will perhaps be clearer if we examine in some detail one of the biblical stories he reads in terms of his theology of silence. Under the rubric *silentium a bonis* Philip discusses a number of ways in which people refrain from doing good deeds (see outline, section D). He distinguishes those who do so with good reason, as for example when Paul left Asia behind without trying to preach there (Acts 16:6-11); those who do so sinfully and deliberately (*culpabiliter*); and those who do so rashly or thoughtlessly (*poenaliter*). The emphasis here is on the tacit intention of the actor; it is this intention which defines the kind of "silence" in question.

The most extended example offered in this section is that of the prophet Jonah, who is described in six chapters (roughly ten times the length of the corresponding biblical narrative) as guilty of *silentium a bonis culpabiliter* (see outline, item D. 2). Jonah, you may remember, was commissioned by Yahweh to preach to the Ninevites, but fled in the opposite direction by sea. The ship was overcome by a tempest; Jonah was discovered by the ship's master to be the only passenger not praying to his god for safety; and eventually he was found out as a sinner,

cast overboard, and swallowed by a great fish. After a psalm of thanksgiving, Jonah was cast up on shore and commissioned again to preach to the Ninehvites. This he eventually did with immediate success. In the last chapter of the book of Jonah, the prophet complains to Yahweh about having had to preach salvation to the unworthy Gentiles, and Yahweh gives him a lesson in compassion towards outsiders, in the form of a miraculous gourd tree.

Philip rightly sees this story's potential for moralization. But interestingly enough, although he says Jonah's sin is one of silence, Philip ignores most of the language acts in the story. Thus, Philip does not comment on the action which occupies most of *Jonah* chapter one, namely the discovery by the sailors of the silent Jonah; Jonah's refusal to pray, and his refusal at first to tell the sailors the reason for the tempest. In the biblical story, this is one of the great anomalies of Jonah's behavior his lack of prayer implies despair or apathy but Philip doesn't mention it at all. Philip also passes completely over the psalm of repentance and thanksgiving in chapter two, and the conversation between God and Jonah in chapter four which contains the real moral of the biblical tale.

Instead, Philip focuses on four events: the first commission to preach, which Jonah flees from; the way in which the great fish compels Jonah to return to land; the second commission which Jonah accepts; and the prompt response of the Ninehvites to Jonah's preaching. On the surface, this seems to abstract the tale into a moral example for preachers. But on closer examination it

becomes clear that Philip is not interested in preaching itself, or even in the success of the preaching mission. Rather, he describes each of the four events of the story as a moment for moral choice, a moment of obedience or disobedience to divine providence. Interior disposition whether sinful or virtuous is the issue here, and it is described as silence. When he finally describes Jonah's death some pages further on, Philip ignores the biblical moral about preaching to all nations, and mentions only Jonah's desire to die, another internal disposition this time a disposition in conformity with God's will. This is a silence of acquiescence.

By contrast, Jonah's first response, to flee from the commission, is a *culpabiliter silentium*, a silent refusal to obey. The great fish, by contrast again, obeys the original divine command and delivers Jonah back to land where he can undertake the mission. This is a silence of punishment for Jonah, and carries the clear lesson that the animal is obedient as Jonah was not. Still as punishment, Jonah is forced to obey God's second commission. This is acquiescence, another silent act. Finally, the Ninehvites also obey not through their own volition but at the silent prompting of providence. What they actually do is also a silence of abstinence; they renounce goods and pleasures to do the penance Yahweh has demanded through his prophet. The longest single part of Philip's exposition concerns this doing of penance, which is portrayed as a renunciation of private goods (*selentium a bonis*) for a common good, the safety of the city. The fact that the king of the Ninehvites decrees a fast day for

domestic animals as well as for men is also highlighted. Again, mute beasts are better at obedience than God's own prophet. Active obediences and the active denial or abstinence from good things are characterized as virtuous or just silences, which conform to God's will and implicitly denounce Jonah's sinful silence.

It is interesting that Philip stresses the obedience of animals, one of the prominent themes of the biblical story, but does not pick up the equally prominent biblical emphasis on other non-human tools of providence the tempest in chapter one or the gourd tree in chapter four. If pressed, Philip would surely have admitted that these were tools of God directly used for teaching Jonah and us. But this aspect of the providential plan is not pertinent to the question of silence which has to do with interior assent or disposition of the will. The animal agents of providence, though not rational, make better images for human intentionality. Their blind obedience is offered as an example to men. Of the domestic animals who do penance at Nineveh, Philip further singles out the yoked animals, again no accident, for these most clearly correspond to the properly harnessed human will.

It will be clear from this single image (it occupies twelve columns of the 261 in the printed edition) that Philip is not talking about silence as a daily, ascetic practice or as a virtue with some single dimension of theological meaning. Instead silence is Philip's central metaphor for the orientation of the interior will, even for the entire interior dimension of Christian life. As such, it needs to be a flexible concept, and will necessarily keep

bumping up against the everyday meaning of the term, because in Philip's use it has so many extraordinary meanings.

I know of no earlier uses of the term which would diminish the originality, even idiosyncrasy, of Philip's construction here, but I would like to argue briefly, before I close, that the underlying spirituality of Philip is a traditional monastic one. Like many twelfth century monastic formulations, Philip's strains hard to be striking and original in expression, but differs very little tries to differ very little from traditional monastic psychology.

Most fundamentally, Philip's reliance on silence as a metaphor for interior life is put firmly in the monastic context of common religious life aimed at personal salvation. This book on silence, he tells us, concerns that dimension of religion cultivated by the individual soul, most successfully in the relative retreat of the cloister. Echoing Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*, he says the preacher or secular priest must first attain an interior disposition towards salvation before he attempts to instruct others. In effect, the Christian must find or create a cloister. Having made this segregation of interior from exterior, Philip leaves behind all the extroverted functions and needs of the cleric and concentrates on developing notions of obedience, humility, and conformity of the individual will to God's. This is perfect silence. It animates clerical life but is not significantly different from the same complex of virtues which animates the quest of the monk.

In the Jonah example, remember, he leaves behind every practical detail of preaching to concentrate on the story as a narrative of Jonah's interior journey. All the accessory characters are models or rebukes to Jonah on the matter of obedience. Jonah's actual preaching, as in the biblical story, gets hardly a mention exactly one sentence (the same sentence) in Philip as in Jonah 3:4. Jonah's final emotion is the desire for death, an absolute annihilation of the will, which becomes the excuse, by the way, for a long digression on the holy desire for death in Philip's chapters 98 and 99.

Philip is also highly traditional in the way he constructs his work. None of the *De institutione clericorum* treatises, and least of all that on silence, is a systematic treatment of a theological notion. None offers any very practical advice on clerical life or manners. Instead each treatise proceeds, by division of the central metaphor, to classify a series of biblical examples and texts.

One would be tempted to think that this was done by way of making the biblical texts more useful for preaching; that is, in order to create a reference book of useful anecdotes, thematically arranged, for preachers to consult in preparing sermons. In fact, however, there is no evidence that this was the case with Philip's work. The virtues stressed as morals of the tales are virtues of clerics, not of lay people. Moreover, each text is cited singly and there is no attempt, as in preaching manuals, to give more than one reading at a time for a text. Again, the organizing metaphors are far removed from the

page 177

usual terminologies of preaching. It would certainly have been very hard to explain some of the farther-fetched applications of the silence metaphor to a lay audience. And the notion of obedience developed is not one of immediate response but of habitual inclination such as was intended to be acquired over the long term in a cloistered or semicloistered common life. Almost none of the silences described is attainable by a lay person outside of a cloister.

Moreover, the cloister seems the most appropriate setting in which to read and digest the elaborate and convolutedly introspective treatise Philip has composed. The unusual metaphorical schema of the work, and its grouping of texts not usually treated together, seem to be intended for thoughtful private reading and meditation. Far from providing a preaching manual, Philip has devised a manual for meditation, the central metaphor of which is meditative silence itself. Philip advises his secular clerical audience that they must make room in their busy schedules for meditative moments which imitate, however briefly, the grand contemplative silence of the cloister. He further invites them to explore how every moral choice, if made with a proper examination of conscience, can imitate the more extended silences of cloistered life and mirror the monastic vow of obedience with a smaller-scale conforming of the will to divine providence.

My view of the work thus contrasts sharply with that of Bynum who presents the *De silentio* largely as a manual for preaching. It is true that the first part of the treatise,

page 178

de silentio a locutione, makes much of positive language acts, and the chief example, the one which would be most immediate to an audience of canons, is that of preaching. But there is little practical advice here: the examples are historical and biblical and, as later in the treatise, Philip is interested in analyzing the moral intention and import of the preaching acts, not their rhetorical value, and certainly not the method of preaching. Again, we are confirmed in believing that the piece is a meditative handbook, a highly (and highly abstractly) organized collection of scriptural passages appropriate for the moral education, in rare silent moments, of canons regular and other secular clerics.

Like so many twelfth to fourteenth century writers on secular clerical and lay spirituality, Philip takes his inspiration from monastic ideals, especially those of humility and obedience. These must be adapted to the situation of life outside the cloister, but rarely is the secular life allowed to suggest its own, independently arrived at, models of moral behavior.

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page 179

Outline

A. Introduction and Distinctions PL203, cols. 945-946 A chapters 1. Praise of silence 1 2. Genera of silence: a. *a locutione* 1-2 [b. *a retributione*] [cf. 1027B] c. *a bonis* d. *a malis* B. *Silentium a locutione* 946A-1027A 1. Abstinence from speaking in words 2-22 2. Abstinence from speaking through signs 23-49 C. *Silentium a retributione* 1027B-1088D 1. Social exchange with like-minded people 50 a. of good will 50-51 b. of ill will 51-62 2. Social exchange with unlike-minded people 63 a. by the evil towards the good 63-68 b. by the good towards the evil 69-70

page 180

C. *Silentium a bonis* 1089A-1145A 1. Abstinence from deeds with good reason (*prudenti consilio*) 71-76 2. Abstinence from deeds deliberately (*culpabiliter*) 77-78 3. Abstinence from deeds impulsively (*poenaliter*) 89-96 D. *Silentium a malis* 1146B-1206A 1. Punishment or reparation for sins (*malis noxiis*) 97-106 2. Undeserved afflictions (*malis tristibus*) 107

page 181

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