

# Silence and Speech Etiquette

## A Contribution to the Study of Islamic Ethics

Ida Zilio-Grandi  
(Università Ca' Foscari, Venezia)

**Abstract** When speaking of silence, the Koran employs three different verbal roots (ṣ-m-t, s-k-t, n-ṣ-t); on the basis of this linguistic profusion, Arabic Islamic culture has elaborated a complex conception of silence, which embraces an element of abstention, linking it to passivity and stillness, and a cognitive element, linking it to listening and learning. The exegetical corpus and above all the moral literature, represented here chiefly by the learned Sunnite Ibn Abī al-Dunyā of Baghdad (d. 281/894)'s *Kitāb al-ṣamt wa ādāb al-lisān*, equate silence with verbal discipline and award it the status of an Islamic value, to the extent that it is posited as an optimal attitude in the believer's relation with God and with other members of the Islamic community.

**Summary** 1 Premise. – 2 Silence in the Koran and the Exegetical Literature. – 3 Silence in the Ethical-religious Literature of the Classical Period. – 4 *Silence and Good Manners in Speech* by Ibn Abī Al-dunyā. – 5 *The Government of the Tongue and the Excellence of Silence*. – 6 Conclusions.

**Keywords** Koran. Ibn Abī al-Dunyā. Silence.

### 1 Premise

In an earlier study (Zilio-Grandi 2015) I came across silence as a constituent element of the virtue known as *ḥilm* or 'judiciousness', that is as a virtuous trait in the believer, and an Islamic ethical value.<sup>1</sup> This was in such aphorisms as «silence (*sukūt*) is itself a reply», or «He who shows compassion is forgiven and he who remains silent (*yaṣmutu*, cf. *ṣamt*) will be safe and sound», and in such verses of poetry as «When the fool speaks do not answer him | silence (again *sukūt*) is better than a reply», found in that most fertile of authors in the field of homiletic literature, Ibn Abī al-Dunyā of Baghdad (d. 281/894), traditionist, jurist and tutor to the Abbasid caliphs al-Mu'taḍid and al-Muḩtafi, specifically in a pamphlet precisely on the subject of judiciousness (ʿAṭā 1993).

But silence's inclusion among the tenets of Islamic ethics is by no means a given, granted that the culture in question is in general more inclined to

1 On silence as a *ḥilm* element, see also Pellat 2012.

verbosity than silence,<sup>2</sup> all the way back to its own cornerstone, the Koran, which in effect announces itself as the most eloquent of human speech, able to convey with precision the divine Word. And the subsequent classical Arabic literary corpus continues to evince an unshakeable faith in speech, attributing to it a solid operational, and even a degree of salvific potency.<sup>3</sup> The same goes for juridical doctrine; we may remember for example the harsh censure of silence when it is a question of 'commanding right and forbidding wrong', and the 'dumb devil' (*šayṭān aḥras*), the personification of a servile code of silence, a familiar figure from traditional imagery.<sup>4</sup>

## 2 Silence in the Koran and the Exegetical Literature

Alongside its respect for the word, we find a corresponding low valuation of silence in the Koran. One has only to remember the vicissitudes of the prophet Zechariah, who was silent for three days, possibly as a punishment, after having doubted divine manifestations (*Koran*, 3,41 and 19,10),<sup>5</sup> and from another angle one could cite Mary the future mother of Jesus (19,26); or Abraham in the episode where silence is a symptom and prerogative of false gods (21,63-65 and 37,92); or again, the silence of the damned in the hereafter (23,109).<sup>6</sup> In these cases the Koran does not refer to silence with a direct epithet, but by litotes, that is negating speech.

2 A point made by, among others, the contemporary Syrian intellectual Muḥammad Rātib al-Nābūlusi (2003).

3 «Which the example best known in the West, that of Šahrazād, demonstrates with particular clarity», as Ghersetti (2010, p. 46) puts it.

4 From a late saying of the Prophet's. The idea is picked up by for example Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyya (d. 751/1350; Ibrāhīm 1411/1991, vol. 2, p. 121), who writes: «How much faith and how much good can reside in one who can see the precepts of God violated [...] with a cold heart and a silent tongue? Such a one is a mute devil. Similarly one who utters falsity is a talking devil (*šayṭān nāṭiq*)».

5 Some exegetes read Zechariah's silence straight forwardly as a punishment. Cf. Ayoub 1992, pp. 115-122 and Marshall 2016. On the silence of Zechariah and of Mary see also below.

6 More precisely a seal placed by God on their mouths (cf. *naḥtimu 'alā afwāmi-him*) in *Koran*, 36,65. Further examples of the negativity of silence might be added, which, even if not wholly explicit in the Koran, are none the less relevant to our exegesis: the silence endured by the Companions of the Cave (*Koran* 18,11), Moses's inability to remain silent as demanded by his instructor (*Koran* 18,67-82), the silence of the Revelation - and consequently that of the Prophet - when he failed to add *in šā' Allāh* to his declaration of his intentions for the future (cf. *Koran*, 8,23-24). In so far as this paper is concerned with the moral dimension of silence, it will omit some important but not strictly pertinent aspects such as the pause (*waqf*) in Koranic readings, or the 'silent' or implicit (*'al-mafhūm'*) element in the Word, as opposed to that explicitly pronounced (*'al-manṭūq'*).

Furthermore the borderline between silence from choice and muteness<sup>7</sup> as an involuntary, perhaps pathological state, is often unclear and a matter of debate between the commentators. Thus, in order to conduct an investigation into silence in the Koran and in Arabic and Islamic culture more generally, it will be more convenient to argue from the lexicography and concentrate our attention on the Arabic words used to describe the act of remaining silent.

In this connection, the classical vocabulary employs mainly *sukūt* e *ṣamt* (with the cognate *ṣumūt*), which seem to be lexicographically synonymous.<sup>8</sup> While not present themselves in the Koran, we do find their verbal roots: both recurring in the space of a couple of dozen verses in *sūrat al-A'rāf* (The Heights).

The root ṣ-m-t - 'to be silent, to be speechless; to be rugged' (DQU, s.v.) - appears in the context of the obstinacy of the unbelievers, deaf to the divine word: «And if ye call them to the Guidance. They follow you not. Whether ye call them or are silent (*ṣāmitūn*) is all one to them» (*Koran*, 7,193).<sup>9</sup> The sense is clear<sup>10</sup> and the commentators have little or nothing to add.

As to the root s-k-t - 'being silent, becoming silent, to stop talking, to stop moving; to abate' (DQU, s.v.) - this is used with reference to Moses, after the episode of the Golden Calf: «Then, when the anger of Moses abated (*sakata*), he took up the tables, and in their inscription there was guidance and mercy for all those who fear their Lord» (*Koran*, 7,154). In this case the exegesis is more copious. Al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) (1412/1992, vol. 9, p. 49),

7 Which the Book treats entirely negatively. The root chiefly employed to express it is b-k-m, «dumbness, muteness; inability to express oneself; to be silent; to be born or to become dumb or mute; to be ignorant». From which *abkam*, «dumb, mute, ignorant, incapable of self-expression», which according to the *Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage* (henceforth DQU, available online at <http://brillonline.nl/browse/dictionary-of-quranic-usage> [2016-05-12]) appears on only one occasion (*Koran*, 16,76) and the plural *bukm*, which appears five times. By contrast, the near synonymous root *aḥras* (see Lane 1968, vol. 4, p. 722) does not appear at all.

8 For Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1312-3) in his *Lisān al-'Arab* (henceforth LA), the verbs *ṣamata* and *sakata* have the same meaning (2003, vol. 8, pp. 278-279, s.v. ṣ-m-t and vol. 7, pp. 214-215, s.v. s-k-t); for other lexicographers, the first refers only to one who does not speak for pathological reasons, while *sakata* can also refer to someone who remains silent while capable of speech (see al-Zabīdī, d. 1205/1791, *Tāǧ al-'Arūs*, 1407-1987, vol. 16, pp. 590-596, s.v. ṣ-m-t and vol. 16, pp. 558-563 s.v. s-k-t) and cf. Lane 1968, vol. 4, p. 1389 [s.v. s-k-t] and p. 1725 [s.v. ṣ-m-t]). Here and subsequently regarding lexicography cf. also <http://www.baheth.info/> (2016-05-12).

9 Here and hereafter all translations from the Koran are from Pickthall's rendering (1930).

10 As confirmed by Noah's words in *Koran*, 71,7: «Whenever I call unto them that Thou mayest pardon them they thrust their fingers in their ears and cover themselves with their garments». Cf. also *Koran*, 2,6. Here and subsequently regarding koranic exegesis cf. also the site of the The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought (Jordan), <http://www.altafsir.com> (2016-05-12).

voicing the standard interpretation, explains that the primary meaning of the term *sakata* is 'hold back', 'abstain' or 'desist' (*kaffa*), applicable to anyone ceasing to do something, including those who keep silent, in so far as they abstain from speech or have finished speaking. However – he goes on – this last explanation will not serve for the passage in question, where the Koran means to say that Moses's anger abates. A similar reading is proposed by, among others, Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209): it makes no sense – he observes (1415/1995, vol. 5, pp. 374-375) – to think of silence (*ṣamt*) here, because this would entail keeping the mouth closed (cf. *sadda fā-hu* 'an *al-kalām*), presumed to be incompatible with anger; therefore *sakata* here should be read as a synonym for *sakana*, 'calmed down', and consequently we are not dealing with the prophet or his anger<sup>11</sup> falling silent (*sukūt*), but with calmness, with equanimity regained on the dissolution (*zawāl*) of the preceding psychological state.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, in neither of these two cases, *ṣamata* and *sakata*, does the Koran attribute any ethical import to silence, as a 'character' (*ḥuluq*) of the good believer; the commentators accept this and refrain from trying to go beyond the apparent meaning.

There is however another verbal root pertinent to our argument, that is *n-ṣ-t*, which expresses particularly the silence required for listening to another's discourse.<sup>13</sup> This too we find in the Koran,<sup>14</sup> with two instances of the imperative plural *anṣitū*.

In the first – which is curiously also to be found in *sūrat al-A'rāf* – the appreciation of silence as an essential element in praiseworthy conduct is incontestable, although strictly confined to listening to the Word of God: «And when the Qur'ān is recited, give ear to it (*istami'ū la-hu*) and pay heed to it (*anṣitū*) that ye may obtain mercy» (*Koran*, 7, 204). Here is al-Ṭabarī's paraphrase:

Lend your ears to it [the Koran] (*iṣḡū la-hu sam'a-kum*) so that you thoroughly take in (*li-tatafahhamū*) each verse, and absorb (*ta'tabirū*) its lessons; remain silent (*anṣitū*) before it so as to understand it and

11 Which being the case it is personalized by the recourse to metaphor or *isti'āra*; among the authors treating of this, al-Zamaḥṣarī (d. 538/1144) and Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī; contemporarily, Ṭaṇṭawī (d. 1431/2010), all on *Koran*, 7, 154. See <http://www.altafsisir.com/Tafasir.asp> (2016-05-12).

12 This is also the view of al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272), Ibn Kaṭīr (d. 774/1373) and, among others, the 'two Ḡalāl', al-Maḥallī (d. 864/1459) and al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), always on *Koran*, 7, 154.

13 Cf. Lane 1968, vol. 8, p. 2801 and, among others, LA (Ibn Maṅzūr 2003, vol. 14, 278-279, s.v. *n-ṣ-t*).

14 Cf. DQU, s.v.: «To listen, to lend an ear to, to accept advice; to be silent, to silence». I note in passing that DQU also refers to silence in relation to the roots *h-m-d* and *m-w-t*, not of strict relevance in the context of this essay.

ponder it (*ta'qilū-hu wa-tatadabbarū-hu*), and do not chatter away over the top of it (*lā talgū fī-hi*) and fail to comprehend its meaning (*fa-lā ta'qilū-hu*). (1412/1992, vol. 9, p. 110)

An interesting recasting, which with its references to understanding (*tafahhum*), absorbing (*i'tibār*), pondering (*tadabbur*) and the intellect (*'aql*), makes the verse under analysis an appeal to cultural discernment as much as to silence; and conversely frames speech as an intrusive element. Al-Ṭabarī explains that this silence/listening refers to the Koranic passages recited by the Imam during the canonical prayer (*al-ṣalāt al-maktūba, al-mafrūda*) and backs up his case with various anecdotes on the *sabab al-nuzūl* of that verse, that is the circumstances that explain its revelation: this passage was revealed because during prayers there were some who talked about their own affairs, greeted acquaintances, got stirred up and noisy at the mere mention of paradise or hell, or arriving late asked others at what point they were and how far there was to go to the end. Returning to the theme, al-Ṭabarī (p. 111) offers an alternative explanation: the obligation of silence refers to the sermon or *ḥuṭba* that accompanies Friday's prayers and other mandatory feast days.<sup>15</sup> Our illustrious commentator maintains in fact that both interpretations are correct, and adopts them himself. By way of confirmation, he (p. 112) quotes a saying of Muḥammad's - «When the imam speaks, remain silent»<sup>16</sup> - and various other authorities, for example the following, attributed to the 'Follower' Muḡāhid ibn Ġabr (d. 104/722 ca) and to the highly regarded Mecca jurist 'Aṭā' (d. 114/732 ca): «Silence (*al-ṣumūt*) is obligatory on two occasions, when a man recites the Koran while praying (*wa huwa yuṣallī*), and when the imam does so while preaching (*wa huwa yaḥṭubu*)».

A few centuries later, Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (1415/1995, vol. 5, p. 439) reiterates the composite meaning of the root n-ṣ-t - «*inṣāt* means at the same time listening (*istimā'*) and remaining silent (*sukūt*)» - and thus in his turn puts the emphasis on the divine will: he explains that the imperative *anṣitū* voices a clearly expressed duty (*wuḡūb*), the exact extension of which remains to be defined: has this prohibition of speech (*taḥrīm al-kalām*) absolute application and does it cover every occasion when the Koran is

15 Diametrically opposite views - «whoever says "be quiet" on Fridays while the imam is preaching, is talking nonsense (*laḡā*)» - are recorded by for example al-Tirmidī (d. 279/892) and Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), cf. Wensinck, Mensing 1967, vol. 6, p. 457, s.v. n-ṣ-t.

16 This saying in a more extended version - «the imam is there so that his example be followed, and when he says "Allah<sup>v</sup> akbar", you should repeat it, and when he recites the Koran, be silent» (*fa-iḡā kabbara fa-kabbirū wa iḡā qara'a fa-anṣitū'*) - is reported by, among others, ibn Māḡa (d. 273/887), *Sunan, kitāb iqāmat al-ṣalāt* [...], no. 838 (from Abū Mūsā al-Aṣ'arī); and by al-Nasā'ī (d. 303/915), *Sunan, kitāb al-masāḡid*, no. 981 (from Abū Hurayra). Here and hereafter, for references to the Tradition cf. <http://library.islamweb.net/hadith/hadithsearch.php> (2016-05-12).

recited, always and regardless, as Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) and other literalists maintain? If this be the case – al-Rāzī (p. 440) observes – then it would be necessary to stay silent when anyone passing by happened to be reciting the Koran, or when a teacher was instructing his pupils. But there are some – he continues – who following Abū Hurayra (d. 58/678 ca) believe that the prohibition only applies to the *ṣalāt*; and others again after Sa'īd ibn Ğubayr (d. 95/712 ca) and 'Aṭā', believe it to be limited to the *ḥuṭba*. Al-Rāzī himself follows yet a third view, from 'the father of Koranic exegesis' Ibn 'Abbās (d. 68/687 ca): that God in this verse meant only to discourage the habit of repeating aloud the words of whoever is conducting the prayers, overlapping with him and creating confusion, as in fact the Prophet's Companions wanted to do.

The second instance of the root n-ṣ-t occurs in the *sūrat al-Aḥqāf* (The Sandhills):

And when We inclined toward thee [Muḥammad] certain of the Jinn, who wished to hear the Qur'ān and, when they were in its presence, said: – Give ear! (*Koran*, 46, 29)

Here on the whole the commentators indulge in digressions of a narrative nature; they imagine their readers' questions and respond according to the Tradition, almost always leaning on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās.<sup>17</sup> When they home in on the exhortation to remain silent/listen, some even translate it with a prosaic «shhh!», some read it as quietness (*sukūn*), that is an abstention (*sukūt*) from the jinns' usual whispering and innuendo;<sup>18</sup> finally there are those who pick up on a note by the very early Qatāda ibn Di'āma (d. 117/735 ca), who refers to the intellectual element implied by the root n-ṣ-t: the group of jinns were aware ('*alima*) that they would not have understood much (*lan ya'qilū*) unless they kept quiet and listened.<sup>19</sup>

To recap, thanks to its recourse to three different verbal roots, the Koran is able to formulate a complex conception of silence; and this complexity

<sup>17</sup> Asking for example: Where was the Prophet for this recital, and where exactly were the jinns? By a palm tree. And how many of them were there? Fewer than ten (cf. the use of *naḥar*), possibly nine. Where did they come from? From the heavens, having been pelted by falling stars (cf. *Koran*, 15,18). Were they invisible? And if so how was Muḥammad aware of their presence? Thanks to divine inspiration. What did the jinns do having left that place? Perhaps, on the instructions of Muḥammad, they became prophets to their own kind and preached Islam, etc. (cf. in particular al-Ṭabarī's commentary).

<sup>18</sup> As does the commentary attributed to '*al-ṣayḥ al-akbar*' Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 638/1240) (1422/2001, vol. 2, p. 223).

<sup>19</sup> According to al-Ṭabarī himself (1412/1992, vol. 26, pp. 19-20). And here is a paraphrase proposed by the modern commentator al-Ālūsī ('Aṭīyya 1415/1994, vol. 13, p. 187) (d. 1270/1854): «Be quiet that we may listen to [the Koran], for there is education (*ta'addub*) in it which will lead us to knowledge ('*ilm*)».

is taken up and emphasised by the main lines of exegesis: a distinction is drawn between silence of the type *ṣamt* (or *ṣumūt*), indicative of a generic absence of communication; a silence of the *sukūt* type, possibly abstract or metaphorical, which has more the sense of abstention, interruption or renunciation, and connects to quietness and tranquillity. And finally a remaining silent-listening conveyed by the derivatives of the root n-ṣ-t, which has an epistemological compass, and connects with knowledge and intelligence, particularly in matters of faith.

As we shall see, these different interpretive strands come together in subsequent thought on silence; principally favoured will be, on the one hand, the idea that staying silent is a renunciation of potential evil and therefore a road to salvation, and on the other, the conviction that silence coincides with listening and therefore with learning. On closer inspection, both ideas function very well as approaches to the prophetic and more generally ecstatic experience, on which after all Islamic culture rests. For example we can review from such a point of view the Koranic representations of Zechariah and Mary, and their parallel muteness in anticipation of the birth of the prophets John the Baptist and Jesus.<sup>20</sup> Or, advancing chronologically in the religious literature, the accounts of Muḥammad at the cave on Ḥirā', where, thanks to the intervention of the angel Gabriel, he breaks silence in a unique illuminative and redeeming experience. Or again, continuing onwards, we might think of the silence of the mystics on their path to the divine Reality. Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996) – to cite a single representative example – maintains in his *Qūt al-qulūb* or *The Nourishment of Hearts*, little short of a manual of Sufism, that silence (*ṣamt*) is one of the four buttresses (*asās*) of the postulant,<sup>21</sup> that it is an ornament to the wise (*zayn li-l-'ālim*) but shameful in the ignorant (*ṣayn li-l-ḡāhil*), and on its own suffices to make up half of 'science' (*'ilm*), the other half being to know when to employ it.<sup>22</sup>

20 On this point, and on the relationship between silence and fasting, see Zilio-Grandi 1997, especially pp. 63-66.

21 The remaining three are fasting, keeping a vigil and seclusion. Cf. al-Makkī (al-Kayyālī 2005, vol. 1, pp. 169-177 and above all p. 169).

22 Al-Makkī (al-Kayyālī 2005, p. 172). On the importance of silence to the mystical experience in general, see Baldini's thorough synthesis (Baldini 2005, chiefly pp. 86-87 and 164-173).

### 3 Silence in the Ethical-religious Literature of the Classical Period

As a sort of halfway house between *'belles lettres'* or *adab* and the religious literature which Islamic thought is pleased to call 'science' or *'ilm*, there exists a genre of Arabic learned writing usually defined – this too indicating its intermediate nature – as 'religious *adab*'.<sup>23</sup> To this category belong a number of works on silence that present the reader with certain exemplary models from history, beginning, needless to say, with the Prophet himself and his *Sunna*. To be more precise, these works are not dedicated exclusively to silence but more widely to 'disciplined speaking', and indeed, relative to the recommended forms of speech, silence properly understood occupies a relatively negligible area.

Although the theme treated comes well within the ambit of 'advice literature', which does not hesitate to recommend reticence and prudence<sup>24</sup> to the courtier,<sup>25</sup> the rigorously traditionistic internal structure and the general tone inevitably tend to place these texts within a religious and foundational framework. Their objective in fact is not optimum relations between subaltern and current ruler but that peaceful co-existence of equals<sup>26</sup> which the believer owes by way of tribute to his Creator in anticipation of the life hereafter; thus the many taciturn or silent ones evoked in the pages of these texts are quiet as part and parcel of a religious adherence to the right and the good, and only secondarily for motives of social harmony.

Throughout the classical period we find examples of such writings on silence, by no means abundant but of particular theoretical and practical interest, distributed through fat compendia of *moralia*, only rarely in monographic

23 Cf. Azarnoosh, Umar 2008. Among the more typical titles of the genre, apart from many by Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, we can cite: *Al-adab al-mufrad* by al-Buḥārī (d. 256/870), *Ādāb al-nufūs* by al-Hārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857), *Al-amthāl wa al-ḥikam* by al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058), *al-Ādāb* by al-Bayhaqī (d. 458/1066). Also on the same theme, as the title indicates, *al-Adab fī al-dīn* by Abū Ḥāmid al-Gazālī (d. 505/1111). Interesting for its particular take, *Adab al-nisā'* (also known as *al-Ghāya wa al-nihāya*) by 'Abd al-Malik ibn Ḥabīb al-Andalusī (d. 238/853), and *'Ishrat al-nisā'* by Aḥmad al-Nasā'ī (d. 303/915).

24 Azarnoosh (2008) writes: «[Ibn Abī al-Dunyā] dedicated a work, *al-Ṣamt wa ādāb al-lisān*, [...] to two fundamental issues of *adab*: reticence at the right times and refraining from vain talk».

25 On the attribution of these works to a sub-genre '*Wesierspiegel*' or 'Mirror of the Viziers', see Gherseti 2010, p. 48 and Bauden, Gherseti 2007, chiefly pp. 295-296.

26 Contrastingly, in the world of *'belles lettres'*, silence is a reflection of disharmony between factions, of an imbalance in power terms (Gherseti 2010, p. 48); it emanates from the courtier towards his prince, from the inferior party, that is, to the greater. For historical examples in the opposite direction, from the greater to the lesser, and in particular on the silence of the Ottomans towards their inferiors, including foreign ambassadors, see Özkan, Speelman 2010 and Pedani 2010.

form. Among the more typical – in chronological order – we might note firstly the *Kitāb al-ṣamt* or *The Book of Silence* by the Egyptian Koranic commentator ‘Abd Allāh ibn Wahb al-Quraṣī (d. 197/812), probably the text that pinpoints the isolation of the theme of silence from the broad context of the prophetic Tradition.<sup>27</sup> The best known and most extensive work in the genre is *Silence and Good Manners in Speech (Kitāb al-ṣamt wa ādāb al-lisān)*<sup>28</sup> from the above-quoted Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, to which we will return. Another notable example would be the chapter entitled *Holding One’s Tongue and Banishing the Man and the Utterance That Are Out of Place (Bāb ḥifẓ al-lisān wa tark al-mar’ wa al-kalām fī-mā lā ya’nī-hi)*, in the *Makārim al-aḥlāq* by the renowned Palestinian religious-ethical writer al-Ḥarā’iṭī (d. 327/939-40).<sup>29</sup> Briefer but no less interesting is the chapter *Holding One’s Tongue and Paying Attention to One’s Words (Faṣl fī ḥifẓ al-lisān wa tawaqqī al-kalām)* in the Hanbalite jurist Ibn Mufliḥ al-Dimaṣqī (d. 763/1361)’s, *Al-ādāb al-ṣar’iyya*.<sup>30</sup> Lastly, Ġalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505)’s<sup>31</sup> *The Right Path in Silence (Ḥusn al-samt fī al-ṣamt)*, one of the many instances where the Egyptian polymath reframes for his contemporaries a theme previously explored by other writers; in his opening lines al-Suyūṭī announces that he is summarising the work of Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, but also refers to other authors, both ancient, like Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), al-Dārimī (d. 255/869) and al-Tirmidī (d. 279/892), or such later ones as al-Bayhaqī (d. 458/1066) and Abū Nu‘aym al-Isbahānī (d. 430/1038).

In closing, a general linguistic note: the derivatives of the root n-ṣ-t are almost entirely absent from this literature – an indication that the original rich Koranic lexicon had been lost<sup>32</sup> – but not its contents, which we find absorbed into *ṣamt* and *sukūt* and derivatives of their roots, all apparently deployed synonymously.

27 Cf. David-Weill (2012). This work is nevertheless included in Abū al-Ḥayr (1995, pp. 405-521, nos. 294-413); it is followed by *Bāb fī al-‘uzla*, on an analogous theme (pp. 523-657, nos. 414-561). On Ibn Wahb see also the works of Muranyi, particularly ‘*Abd Allāh b. Wahb. Leben und Werk. Al-Muwaṭṭa’*’ (1992).

28 Consulted in the critical edition prepared by Abū Ishāq al-Ḥuwaynī (1989), also to be found at <http://islampost.com/w/don/Web/3258/1.htm> (2016-05-12).

29 The work has been edited by ‘Abd Allāh ibn Baġġāš Ṭābit al-Ḥimyarī (2006, vol. 1, pp. 773-858, nos. 480-527).

30 Edited by Ṣu‘ayb al-Arna‘ūt and ‘Umar al-Qayyān (1977, vol. 1, pp. 34-43. Available online at [http://library.islamweb.net/newlibrary/display\\_book.php?bk\\_no=43&ID=8&idfrom=16&idto=18&bookid=43&startno=0](http://library.islamweb.net/newlibrary/display_book.php?bk_no=43&ID=8&idfrom=16&idto=18&bookid=43&startno=0) [2016-05-12]).

31 Edited by Aḥmad Muḥammad Sulaymān Disūq (2010, pp. 61-119, available online at <http://ia600400.us.archive.org/0/items/hsfss/hsfss.pdf> [2016-05-12]). This edition also boasts a brief study of Ibn Abī al-Dunyā and his principal works, pp. 36-43).

32 They also make few appearances in the Sunnite ‘canonical’ compilations; cf. also Wensinck, Mensing (1967, vol. 6, pp. 457-458, s.v. n-ṣ-t). In modern Arabic the root expresses for the most part listening alone, cf. Wehr 1979, p. 1137.

#### 4 *Silence and Good Manners in Speech by Ibn Abī Al-dunyā*

Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's work, which occupies pride of place in the genre, is subdivided into 25 sections or *abwāb*, with a miscellany to close; the section titles are a sufficiently clear indication of their contents:

- 1) The government of the tongue and the excellence of silence;<sup>33</sup> 2) It is forbidden to speak indiscreetly and plunge into falsity;<sup>34</sup> 3) It is forbidden to speak of what does not concern you;<sup>35</sup> 4) Censure of controversy;<sup>36</sup> 5) Censure of fastidious speech;<sup>37</sup> 6) Censure of quarrelling;<sup>38</sup> 7) Speaking ill of the absent to be censured;<sup>39</sup> 8) What it means to 'speak ill of the absent';<sup>40</sup> 9) To whom it is permitted to speak ill of the absent;<sup>41</sup> 10) The Muslim defends his brother's honour;<sup>42</sup> 11) Censure of calumny;<sup>43</sup> 12) Censure of duplicity;<sup>44</sup> 13) It is forbidden to believers to mock one another;<sup>45</sup> 14) How to make amends when you have spoken ill of the absent;<sup>46</sup> 15) What one must do to speak well with all men;<sup>47</sup> 16) Censure of foul language and obscenity;<sup>48</sup> 17) What may not be said;<sup>49</sup> 18) Those

33 *Bāb ḥifẓ al-lisān wa faḍl al-samt, Kitāb al-ṣamt*, pp. 41-73, nos. 1-68.

34 *Al-nahy 'an fuḍūl al-kalām wa ḥawḍ al-bāṭil*, pp. 74-91, nos. 69-106.

35 *Al-nahy 'an al-kalām f-mā lā ya'nī-ka*, pp. 92-98, nos. 107-122.

36 *Ḍamm al-mirā'*, pp. 99-108, nos. 123-146.

37 *Ḍamm al-taqa'ur fī al-kalām*, pp. 109-112, nos. 147-152.

38 *Ḍamm al-ḥuṣūmāt*, pp. 113-117, nos. 152-161.

39 *Al-ġība wa ḍammi-hā*, pp. 117-134, nos. 162-203.

40 *Tafsīr al-ġība*, pp. 134-139, nos. 204-217.

41 *Al-ġība allatī yaḥillu li-ṣāḥibi-hā al-kalām bi-hā*, pp. 140-146, nos. 218-238.

42 *Ḍabb al-muslim 'an 'irḍ aḥī-hi*, pp. 147-152, nos. 239-250.

43 *Ḍamm al-namīma*, pp. 153-161, nos. 251-273.

44 *Ḍamm ḍī al-lisānayn*, pp. 162-166, nos. 274-281.

45 *Mā nuḥiya 'an-hu al-'ibād an yashāra ba'ḍu-hum min ba'ḍ*, pp. 167-170, nos. 282-290.

46 *Kaffārat al-iġtiyāb*, pp. 171-174, nos. 291-300.

47 *Mā umira bi-hi al-nās an yasta'milū fī-hi anfusa-hum min al-qawl al-ḥasan li-l-nās aġma'in*, pp. 175-180, nos. 301-316.

48 *Ḍamm al-fuḥṣ wa al-baḍā'*, pp. 181-191, nos. 317-340.

49 *Mā nuḥiya an yutakallama bi-hi*, pp. 192-201, nos. 341-370.

who curse should be censured;<sup>50</sup> 19) Censure of practical joking;<sup>51</sup> 20) Keeping a secret;<sup>52</sup> 21) Speak infrequently and with discretion;<sup>53</sup> 22) The excellence of sincerity;<sup>54</sup> 23) Keeping one's promises;<sup>55</sup> 24) Censure of lying;<sup>56</sup> 25) Censure of flatterers;<sup>57</sup> 26) Miscellany of preceding chapters.<sup>58</sup>

Chapter by chapter, the work is entirely made up of traditionistic material contemporary with that contained in the great *Ḥadīṭ* collections, presented similarly without introduction or commentary.<sup>59</sup> It comprises more than 700 stories<sup>60</sup> centred on the Prophet, on other leading personalities of emergent Islam – such as the Companions Ibn Mas'ūd and Ibn 'Abbās, or the scholar al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī – and a number of caliphs dear to didactic literature – the 'Rightly-Guided' Abū Bakr (d. 13/634) and 'Omar ibn al-Ḥaṭṭāb (d. 23/644) or the Umayyad Mu'āwiya (d. 60/680) and 'Omar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz (d.101/720).<sup>61</sup> As elsewhere in his œuvre, Ibn Abī al-Dunyā makes reference to a number of figures from wider sacred history, most notably Jesus who appears frequently,<sup>62</sup> or the legendary Luqmān. On other occasions we meet Moses, Ishmael, Solomon, David, Adam and Dū al-Qarnayn.

Notwithstanding the material's arrangement into distinct sections, one's first impression on skimming the book is one of disorder, as if it had been composed with a degree of carelessness, in so far as near identical stories appear and reappear from one chapter to the next, or even within the same

50 *Ḍamm al-la'ānayn*, pp. 203-208, nos. 371-387: note here an error on the editor's part (plural rather than dual).

51 *Ḍamm al-muzāḥ*, pp. 209-212, nos. 388-401.

52 *Ḥifẓ al-sirr*, pp. 213-214, nos. 402-408.

53 *Qillat al-kalām wa al-taḥaffuẓ fī al-manṭiq*, pp. 216-224, nos. 409-440.

54 *Al-ṣidq wa faḍli-hi*, pp. 225-229, nos. 441-452.

55 *Al-wafā' bi-l-wa'd*, pp. 230-233, nos. 453-465.

56 *Ḍamm al-kaḍb*, pp. 234-270, nos. 466-591.

57 *Ḍamm al-maddāḥīn*, pp. 271-275, nos. 592-607.

58 *Ġāmi' li-mā taqaddama min al-abwāb*, pp. 275-313, nos. 608-754.

59 As is the author's habit, the one exception being his *Makārim al-aḥlāq*, on which see Bellamy (1963).

60 754 to be exact, over 313 manuscript pages.

61 «'Omar was something of an enigma: a prince of the despised Umayyad house, and yet a pious statesman worthy of nostalgia and imitation. As such, he is one of the few early historical personages who became the subject of discrete biographical works early on» Cobb 2012.

62 In more than twenty stories. On the presence of Jesus in Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's works, see Khalidi 2003, pp. 108-124.

chapter, with continual repetitions. The same is true of individuals: for example every chapter opens with one or more references to the Prophet Muḥammad, who then gives way to other protagonists, only to reappear from time to time in unpredictable fashion. Reading more carefully however, it becomes clear that Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's concern is to present his material in the most varied manner possible, pre-empting any comfortable expectations on the reader's part and wrong-footing him every time; this is his motive for switching personalities and settings, tones and registers, for passing abruptly from a lapidary saying to an extended narrative, or a poetic text, for touching on a certain theme to then return to it unexpectedly a few, or even many pages later. An approach that may well chime with the modern reader. Behind the apparent unconcern for strict form, we can in fact discern then an overall aesthetic intent in the order – or rather disorder – in which the anecdotes and quotes tumble after one another. A similar unpredictability can be found not so much in his style – calm and sober throughout, as is the norm for traditionistic material – as in his tone, which alternates serious, even solemn, passages with witty turns of phrase or semi-comic sallies.

## 5 *The Government of the Tongue and the Excellence of Silence*

Of the various sections making up *Silence and Good Manners in Speech*, the only one specifically dedicated to silence is the first, entitled *The Government of the Tongue and the Excellence of Silence*. We have thought it worthwhile to dedicate a little time to this chapter, by way of example, translating a few passages of note. As is entirely appropriate, it opens by remembering the Prophet's own silence. The narrator here is the notable Meccan 'Abd Allāh Abū Sufyān (d. 32/653 ca), in his time an enemy of both Islam and Muḥammad.

I asked: «Messenger of God, tell me something about Islam so that I never need ask again anyone else». «Say "I have believed in God", and keep to the right path (*istaqim*)». And I asked again: «And of what should I be beware?». He pointed with his hand at his tongue.<sup>63</sup>

In the work as a whole and this chapter in particular, the central theme is the importance of silence in religious observance and to ensure good

63 *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, edited by al-Ḥuwaynī (1989, p. 41, no. 1; cf. p. 47, no. 7, and p. 56, no. 22). This anecdote is also recorded by Ibn Ḥanbal (*Musnad, musnad al-makkiyīn* no. 15112, edited by Šu'ayb al-Arna'ūt, 'Ādil Muršid et al., 1421/2001, also available at <http://shamela.ws/browse.php/book-25794#page-1>). Henceforth for references to the literature of Tradition, cf. <http://library.islamweb.net> (2016-05-12).

fortune in one's life ahead. In this context a key example is Muḥammad's saying «He who believes in God and the Last Day should speak good or keep silent» which Ibn Abī al-Dunyā quotes twice, one almost right after the other, in parallel versions reported by Abū Hurayra and by Abū Šurayḥ al-Ḥuzā'ī (d. 68/687-8).<sup>64</sup> The author also attributes similar words to Salmān al-Fārisī (d. 35/656 ca),<sup>65</sup> and, in substance at least, to Jesus:

«Show us how we may enter into paradise». He answered: «Refrain entirely from speaking (*lā tanṭiqū abad<sup>an</sup>*)». «We are not capable of such a thing», they protested. «Then speak only of the good», he said.<sup>66</sup>

And again on the role of silence in good religious practice:

From Mu'āḍ ibn Ġabal (d. 18/639). I asked: «Messenger of God, will we be punished for what we say?». He exclaimed: «Your poor mother, Ibn Ġabal, that she has lost a son! Are men hurled head-first into hell for anything else other than the harvest of their tongues (*ḥaṣā'id alsinati-him*)?»<sup>67</sup>

Sometimes the anecdotes suggest a link between government of the tongue and hospitality. For example,

An Arab from the desert went to the Prophet: «Tell me what I must do to enter paradise», he asked him. «Feed the hungry, assuage the thirsty, command right (*ma'rūf*) and forbid wrong (*munkar*), and if you cannot do these things, hold your tongue always except to speak of what is good (*ḥayr*)».<sup>68</sup>

64 In the first using the root s-k-t («*fa-l-yaqul ḥayr<sup>an</sup> aw li-yaskut*», and in the second ṣ-m-t («*aw li-yaṣmut*»), *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 63 (respectively nos. 40 e 42). In an extended version which includes the duty of hospitality, the saying is repeated by Muslim (d. 261/875), *Ṣaḥīḥ, kitāb al-īmān*, no. 71, still from Abū Hurayra, and by al-Buḥārī (d. 256/870), *Ṣaḥīḥ, kitāb al-riqāq*, no. 6022, from Ḥuwaylid ibn 'Amr. It also appears in al-Dārimī (d. 255/869), ibn Māǧa (d. 273/887), al-Tirmidī (d. 279/892), and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855). Cf., again after the Prophet, *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 71, no. 64: «God has mercy on his servant who says good things and gains (*ḡanima*) thereby, or who refrains from speaking ill (*sakata 'an sū'*) and remains safe and sound (*salima*)», from Ḥālid ibn Abī 'Imrān; similar is p. 63 (no. 41), again from the Prophet, from al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728).

65 *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 64, no. 44.

66 *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 66, no. 46, from Sufyān al-Ṭawrī (d. 161/778).

67 *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 46, no. 6; cf. Ibn Ḥanbal, *musnad al-anṣār*, no. 21494.

68 *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 72, no. 67, from al-Barā. There is a more extended variant in al-Buḥārī, *Al-adab al-mufrad*, no. 69. Cf. the following anecdote by al-Aswad ibn Aṣram al-Muḥāribī. «I said: "Messenger of God, give me a commandment". He asked: "Are you in command of your hand?" I answered: "And what can I command if not my own hand!?" He asked again:

From 'Uqba ibn 'Āmir (d. 58/677-8). I asked: «Messenger of God, what is salvation (*nağāh*)?». He answered: «Control (*amlīk*) your tongue,<sup>69</sup> and may your house be ample for you (*wa-l-yasa'-ka*),<sup>70</sup> and weep for your sins».<sup>71</sup>

An analogous theme is the relationship between silence and charity: «Blessed are those who give their excess money and hold back their excess words», the Prophet is reported as saying.<sup>72</sup> Again from the Prophet: «Hold back the spiteful things (*šarr*) [you might address] to others; this is a benefaction (*šadaqa*) that you make to yourself».<sup>73</sup>

Accounts of this type, pairing the religious with the social efficacy of silence, make up the greater part of the material collected by Ibn Abī al-Dunyā. As often as not, this pairing is evenly balanced, as in the following anecdote by al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī which involves the Caliph Mu'āwiya with another icon of judiciousness, al-Aḥnaf al-Tamīmī (d. 67/686-7):

They were chattering at Mu'āwiya's [...] and [Abū Baḥr] al-Aḥnaf was silent. «What is it with you that you won't speak, Abū Baḥr?», they asked him. He answered: «If I speak falsely, I fear God; if I speak the truth I fear you».<sup>74</sup>

A similar aphorism from one Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sukkārī, which echoes the Koranic silence-listening above:

Silence (*šamt*) guarantees a man two good things (*ḥaṣḥatayn*) at once: the integrity of his religion (*al-salāma fī dīni-hi*) and the comprehension of what his companion says (*al-fahm 'an šāḥibi-hi*).<sup>75</sup>

“Are you in command of your tongue?” I answered: “And what can I command if not my own tongue!” He said: “Stretch out your hand then only towards the good, and speak only good (*ma'rūf*) with your tongue» *Kitāb al-šamt*, 64 (no. 43).

69 Cf. *Kitāb al-šamt*, p. 48, no. 10: «He who is silent shall be saved» (*man šamata nağā*), a saying of 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Amr's.

70 Meaning: «So that you will be able to accommodate others».

71 *Kitāb al-šamt*, again p. 41, no. 2; cf. Ibn Hanbal, *Musnad*, *musnad al-anṣār*, no. 21649 and Ibn Wahb, *Kitāb al-šamt*, no. 299 (cf. no. 374). Further on the author attributes a similar saying to Jesus, *Kitāb al-šamt*, p. 52, no. 15: «Blessed are those who mourn their sins, govern their tongues and keep a spacious house». Cf. too 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Amr's saying above (note 72).

72 *Kitāb al-šamt*, p. 43, no. 64, from Rakb al-Miṣrī.

73 *Kitāb al-šamt*, p. 68, no. 73, from Abū Ḍarr. The saying occurs in an extended version in Muslim, *kitāb al-īmān*, no. 122.

74 *Kitāb al-šamt*, p. 70, no. 62.

75 *Kitāb al-šamt*, p. 69, no. 55.

In short, the government of the tongue furthers good relations with one's fellows and is equally pleasing to God. But on occasions the emphasis is weighted more towards serene relations with other Muslims:

The Messenger of God said: «The believer (*mu'min*) is one whom people trust (*amina-hu*); the Muslim (*muslim*) is one who spares other Muslims (*salima al-muslimūn 'an [...]*) his tongue and his hand;<sup>76</sup> the emigrant (*muhājir*) is one who abandons (*hağara*) evil (*sū'*);<sup>77</sup> and in the name of He who owns me, no-one will enter paradise who has not spared his neighbour [the recital of] his misfortunes».<sup>78</sup>

The chapter we have chosen to look at as an example turns not only on silence but also, as we have seen, on the 'government' – or 'protection' or 'safeguarding' (*ḥifẓ*) – of the tongue as if it were a precious asset. And of course there is the well-known maxim that Ibn Abī al-Dunyā attributes to Solomon, comparing words to riches: «If speech is silver, silence (*ṣamt*) is golden»;<sup>79</sup> famous now the world over, it seems that it is first recorded here in the Arabic literature in two, very similar, versions, by Ibn Abī al-Dunyā and by the slightly older al-Ġāḥiẓ (d. 255/868-9).<sup>80</sup> To the same context belongs what Muḥammad ibn Wāsi' al-Azdī (d. 123/740-1) said to the Basra preacher Mālik ibn Dīnār (d. 130/747 ca): «It is harder to keep a grip on one's tongue than on *dīnār* and *dirham*».<sup>81</sup>

Clearly, in these writings, silence always has positive connotations whereas speech may be a good or a bad thing at the same time; on the ambiguity of speech we have another eloquent saying of the Prophet's: «The best (*ayman*) thing and the ugliest (*aš'am*) that each one of you has is between your jaws».<sup>82</sup> There are also a number of citations which, even

76 Up to here cf. p. 59, no. 29.

77 Up to here cf. p. 57, no. 25.

78 *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 58, no. 28, from Anas. Cf. p. 48, no. 9: «A man's faith cannot be considered irreproachable until his heart is irreproachable, and his heart is not irreproachable until his tongue is irreproachable. No one will enter into paradise who has not spared his fellows [the recital of] his misfortunes»; cf. also the very similar p. 57, no. 26, and p. 58, no. 28.

79 *In kāna al-kalām min fiḍḍa fa-al-ṣamt min ḡahab*, *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 66 (no. 47), from the celebrated Syrian jurist al-Awzā'ī (d. 157/774).

80 The only difference being that the second employs *sukūt* rather than *ṣamt* for 'silence'. Cfr. Wasserstein 1999, particularly pp. 247-249.

81 *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 69, no. 57. On the parallel treatment of speech and money, cf. p. 56, no. 24.

82 «[...] and that is the tongue». *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 70, no. 63, from 'Adī ibn Ḥātim (d. 68/687-8). The saying is sparsely attested, but does appear in Ibn Ḥibbān (d. 354/965)'s *Ṣaḥīḥ*, no. 5835, on the same authority.

if negatively, commend silence, while at the same time awarding a certain grandeur to the word. Examples would be the following anecdotes, concerning Muḥammad's earliest successors:

'Omar ibn al-Ḥaṭṭāb saw Abū Bakr about to exercise his tongue. «What are you doing, Caliph of God's Messenger?» he asked him. The other replied: «This has procured me a deal of trouble (*awrāda-nī al-mawārid*). And the Messenger of God has said that there is nothing in the body that does not complain to God about the sharp end (*ḥidda*) of the tongue».<sup>83</sup>

'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661) said: «The tongue heads the body (cf. *qiwām al-badan*), and if it keeps to the right path the members of the body too will follow the right path, but if the tongue bolts off (*iḍṭaraba*), no other part of the body can rein it in (*lam yaqum la-hu*)».<sup>84</sup>

Which suggests that speech requires constant attention – «more even than looking where to place our feet»<sup>85</sup> – but not so much on account of its being a gift in need of tutelage but rather as a potential danger to be wary of. On this subject Ibn Abī al-Dunyā relays a witticism of the already cited Mālik ibn Dīnār's, based on the idea that human words, being over-represented among reprehensible behaviours, cause a great deal of work for the angelic scribes: «If it were men that had to keep the ledgers (*ṣuḥuf*), they would talk less».<sup>86</sup>

Thus, the only way of being sure to avoid sinning with the tongue is to keep quiet, as the celebrated traditionist Anas ibn Mālik (d. 93/712) used to teach: «Those who are happy to remain safe and sound, keep their mouths shut».<sup>87</sup> But silence may not come so easily:

From Ramla bint Ṣaḥr (d. 46/666).<sup>88</sup> «Every word a man utters can harm him», said the Prophet, «except commanding right and forbidding

83 *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 50, no. 13, from 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Uṭmān; cf. p. 55, no. 19, where the passage appears in abbreviated form.

84 *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 69, no. 58. Cf. a saying by Abū Sa'īd al-Ḥudrī (d. 74/693-4): «When a man wakes up, all his limbs wake and admonish (*tukaffiru*) his tongue, saying: "Be fearful of God for our sakes, because when you follow the right path (*istaqamta*) we will do the same, but if you follow a crooked path (*i'waḡaḡta*), we will follow you there too"», *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 49, no. 12; cf. Al-Tirmiḏī, *kitāb al-zuḥd*, no. 2344.

85 *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 60, no. 32, from Abū Ḥayyān al-Taymī (d. 145/762-3).

86 *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 66, no. 48.

87 *Man sarra-hu an yaslama, fa-l-yalzam al-ṣamt, Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 49, no. 11. The saying is taken up by later authors, for example al-Ṭabarānī (d. 360/971), *Al-mu'ḡam al-aṣṣat*, no. 1976 in Ṭāriq ibn 'Awaḍ Allāh and Muḥsin al-Ḥusayn's edition (1415-1995).

88 One of Muḥammad's wives, better known as Umm Ḥabība.

wrong,<sup>89</sup> or the remembrance (*dīkr*) of God». A man expostulated: «How hard is [to obey] this saying».<sup>90</sup>

One day, Dāwud al-Ṭā'ī (d.165/781-2)<sup>91</sup> said to Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz: «Did you know that governing one's tongue (*ḥifẓ al-lisān*) is the hardest and most meritorious thing we can do?» «Certainly», Muḥammad replied, «but how do we achieve it?»<sup>92</sup>

Given the word's potential for wickedness, it's government can easily be interpreted as concealment or seclusion; and it is a short step from there to find prohibitions on speech assimilated to those on sexuality and inappropriate talk compared to the sin of adultery (*zinā*), sometimes in quite crude terms. For example:

From Abū Hurayra. They asked the Messenger of God what of all things most helped people to enter paradise. He replied: «The fear of God (*taqwā*) and an upright character (*ḥusn al-ḥuluq*)».<sup>93</sup> They asked him what was most likely to send folk to hell, and he answered: «Those two cavities, the vulva and the mouth».<sup>94</sup>

From Sahl ibn Sa'd. The Messenger of God has said: «Whoever can vouch for what he has between his jaws and what he has between his legs, I will guarantee him paradise».<sup>95</sup>

Similarly strong parallels are drawn between speech and wild beasts,

89 Up to here cf. *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 59, no. 30.

90 This is followed by Abū Sufyān's reprimand, citing various passages from the Koran. *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 52, no. 14. Cf. al-Tirmiḍī, *kitāb al-zuhd*, no. 2349 and ibn Māḡa, *kitāb al-fitān*, no. 3972.

91 Among the leading disciples of Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767).

92 *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 69, no. 56.

93 Up to here cf. p. 58, no. 27.

94 *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 44, no. 4. Repeated in very similar form by ibn Māḡa, *kitāb al-zuhd*, no. 4244, and by Ibn Ḥanbal, *musnad al-'ašara al-mubaššarīn bi-l-ḡanna*, 8890, on the same authority. Cf. *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 55, no. 21, from Ibn 'Omar: «The Messenger of God said: "He who holds (*kaffā*) his tongue, the excellent and most high God will cover his nudity (*satara 'awrata-hu*), and he who masters his anger the excellent and most high God will keep him from his sins, and he who is penitent before the excellent and most high God will find his penitence accepted"». Cf. also the verses of 'Abd al-Raḥmān, son of Ḥassān al-Ṭābit (the latter d. around 670ce), a panegyrist of the Prophet, *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 71, no. 66.

95 *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 44, no. 3; cfr. p. 55, no. 20. Not widely recorded, this saying appears in a *lectio brevior* by al-Ḥarā'iṭī, *Masāwī' al-aḥlāq*, no. 480 in Muṣṭafā al-Šiblī's edition (1412/1992), from 'Ā'iša.

going beyond government to preventive detention. An anonymous sage once declared: «My tongue is a savage beast (*sabu'*) and if I let it loose I fear it will devour me». <sup>96</sup> Along the same lines we have a declaration by Ibn Mas'ūd: «I swear by Him who alone is God, nothing has need [...] of lengthy imprisonment (*ṭūl siġn*<sup>in</sup>) more than the tongue». <sup>97</sup>

A final point to note is the relationship between silence and intellectual activity.

Ibn Abī al-Dunyā attributes the following definition of the intelligent person (*'āqil*) to «the wisdom of the line of David»: he is the man who can identify the right moment (*'ārif*<sup>an</sup> *bi-zamāni-hi*), can govern his tongue (*ḥāfiẓ*<sup>an</sup> *li-lisāni-hi*) and minds his own business (*muqbil*<sup>an</sup> *'alā šā'ni-hi*). <sup>98</sup> And with more direct reference to Islam, the author recalls the Caliph 'Omar ibn al-Ḥaṭṭāb – «He who talks a lot, errs a lot» <sup>99</sup> – and al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī – «The man has not understand his religion (*mā 'aqala dīna-hu*) who cannot govern his tongue». <sup>100</sup> This 'intelligent silence' can have a sense of standing apart from certain groups of people if their talk is futile and confined to worldly matters. Wuhayb ibn al-Ward (d. 153/770 ca) maintains that «wisdom (*ḥikma*) has ten components, and nine of these consist of silence (*ṣamt*), while the tenth is isolating oneself (*'uzla*) from others»; <sup>101</sup> where isolation however indicates «being with others and if they immerse themselves in the remembrance of God, then you should dive in with them, but if they immerse themselves in other things, then remain silent (*fa-askut*)». <sup>102</sup>

It is not for Ibn Abī al-Dunyā then a question of fleeing the world but of living better in the world, thanks to a learned understanding of its rules, as ideally represented by the Prophet and the pious. On this theme the author presents us with a story whose protagonist is the Khorasan Šūfī Ibrāhīm ibn Adham (d. 161/777-8), also celebrated elsewhere in Islamic literature for his intelligence and moral stature. <sup>103</sup>

96 *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 63, no. 39, from Sufyān al-Ṭawrī. Cf. p. 67, no. 51, a saying of Abū 'Imrān al-Ġawfī: «The tongue of each one of you is a dog (*kalb*), if you give it power of you it will devour you»; cf. also p. 70, no. 61.

97 *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 53, no. 16, from Anas (cf. p. 56, no. 23). The missing passage is a terminological clarification attributed to Abū Mu'āwiya.

98 *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 60, no. 31, from the Yemenite scholar Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. 110/728 or 114/732).

99 *Man kaṭura kalāmu-hu kaṭura saqaṭu-hu*, *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, 68 (no. 53); identical but «from an Indian sage» *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, no. 54.

100 *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 61, no. 34.

101 *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 62, no. 36.

102 From 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181/797), *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 62, no. 37; cf. p. 63, no. 38.

103 For his reputation in Persian, Hindi and Indonesian literature cf. Jones (2012).

Abū Ishāq al-Fazārī (d. 188/803 ca) says: Ibrāhīm ibn Adham would be quiet for long periods and then when he talked would hardly stop. One day he had been quiet for a good while and so I said to him: «Might you decide to say something?» He answered: «There are four kinds of conversation. One is where you hope for some advantage (*manfa'a*) but also fear some harm (*'āqiba*) will come from it, when abstaining [from speech] will spare you [the harm]. The second is speech from which you fear no harm but in which you can see no advantage, therefore avoiding it costs your tongue or body nothing. A third is where you hope for no advantage but cannot be sure of escaping harm, which should be enough for the man of intelligence. Finally, there are conversations where you are sure to risk nothing and where advantage may accrue; well then, [only] these should be engaged in».<sup>104</sup>

Finally, in the same vein as the preceding anecdote, a quotation that extends the appreciation of silence to other cultures and recommends it as a value to be universally shared, in 'secular' or at least religiously neutral terms:

Four kings met together and challenged one another to make one declaration, each having just the one speech at his disposal. They were the King of India, the King of China, Chosroes and Caesar. The first said: «I regret (*andamu*) what I have said, but I do not regret what I have not said». And the second: «When I speak, my words control me and not I them; when I do not speak, I control them and not they me». The third: «I am amazed by those who speak, and either their words backfire on them, or, if they do not backfire, they do them no credit». And the fourth: «I can stand by what I have not said, better than by what I have said».<sup>105</sup>

## 6 Conclusions

The Koran refers to silence through the use of three different verbal roots (ṣ-m-t, s-k-t, n-ṣ-t), and this lexical richness translates, in exegetical thought, into a complex semantics. The leading commentators (here represented chiefly by the Sunnites al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī) stress the simultaneous presence of a negative element, of closure or restriction, and a positive one, of openness and availability: on the one side, then, silence as abstention (*kaff*), calm (*sukūn*), avoidance of the complications of sin

<sup>104</sup> *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 76, no. 50. The chronicler of this saying, Abū Ishāq al-Fazārī, is a traditionist from Kufa well known to the moral literature; on him, see Muranyi (1985, pp. 63-97). The authority is the Prophet's Companion, Ḥalaf ibn Tamīm who comments in closing: «You have left out three quarters of the speech!», to which al-Fazārī replied: «Yes», *Kitāb al-ṣamt*.

<sup>105</sup> *Kitāb al-ṣamt*, p. 71, no. 65, from Abū Bakr ibn 'Ayyāš al-Muqri' (d. 193/809).

and wickedness; on the other, silence as a prerequisite of listening, and particularly of listening to the words of the Koran, in prayer or preaching, and consequently as a route to the study of religion, not least in the sense of its rational comprehension (cf. *tafahhum*, *i'tibār*, *tadabbur*, *'aql*).

Both elements, the positive and the negative, we find too in the moral literature dedicated to silence, part and parcel of the wider 'religious *adab*'. With one or two peculiarities.

Firstly, as can be seen from an overview of the titles of works that have come down to us, they by no means read silence (*ṣamt* or *sukūt* without apparent distinction) as a prohibition to which the believer must subscribe, a sort of 'fast of silence',<sup>106</sup> but as a more general 'government of the tongue' (*ḥifẓ al-lisān*); thus assimilating silence to disciplined speech. Exhortations to this reading of silence stem from two quite different presuppositions. Silence can be taken as a prophylactic against speech's potential debasement of itself; as the power of speech is a gift from God to man. On the other hand, silence can be interpreted as a defence against the many ills speech may bring about, some as serious as breaches of sexual mores and dangerous as wild beasts on the loose.

Secondly, compared to the exegetical literature, the moral literature lays a considerable emphasis on the sociological aspect alongside the strictly religious; this is evident for example in Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's *Kitāb al-ṣamt wa ādāb al-lisān*, and especially in its opening chapter. In this work as in others belonging to the same genre, the disciplining of speech is specified as a comportment pleasing to God – and therefore a help on the road to paradise – precisely because it is also welcome to one's fellow men, like charity and hospitality. In this sense silence signifies particularly abstinence from scandalmongering and other verbal misdemeanours including unasked for or inappropriate speech or the recital of one's own misfortunes.

Lastly, Ibn Abī al-Dunyā highlights silence as listening, that is as the acknowledgement, respect for and understanding of others, but also as the recognition of being one part of a group of interlocutors. And this means no less than the whole of human society, given that – our author is suggesting between the lines – such active, open and above all intelligent listening cannot but overflow the boundaries of any one faith.

106 In any case forbidden on the basis of a saying of the Prophet's («*nahā 'an ṣawm al-ṣamt*») passed down by the *Musnad Abī Ḥanīfa*, no. 213, 214 e 264.

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