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Silence as a moment of luxury : insights from contemporary travellers visiting churches

Author(s): Kauppinen-Räisänen, Hannele; Cristini, Helene; Jauffret, Marie-Nathalie

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Silence as a moment of luxury.

Insights from contemporary travellers visiting churches

ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on travellers' pursuit of silence. This quest may be a counteraction to the current invasion of noise in everyday life. Silence has become something rare, unique and exclusive—which conveys luxury in its pristine and simplest form. The study focused on silence in the setting of a church, which is a place typically intrinsically attached to silence. A qualitative semi-structured study was designed to explore how churches' atmospheres contribute to the experience of silence, as well as what such moments of silence mean to the contemporary traveller. Silence in a church is very much defined by the place itself. For the traveller, silence is (1) a code of conduct, (2) an inner state, (3) a break, (4) an empowering experience and (5) a precious moment. The findings of this study can be used to promote moments of silence for weary travellers in the need of quiet.

Keywords: Church, experience, luxury, silence, traveller, quiet.

INTRODUCTION

For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under the heaven:

A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.

(Ecclesiastes 3:1, King James Version)

Churches are intrinsically places of worship. Worships may be ministered by a pastor or other figure of religious authority or people may gather in churches for silent, even private, worship. Regardless of religion, places of worship—churches, basilicas, synagogues, mosques, temples and shrines—have also always been places visited by travellers. Religious tourism acknowledges sacred destinations and places of worship, which attract visitors for religious and spiritual reasons (Malodia & Singla, 2017). These places attract travellers from around the world, to such a degree that they are recognised as destination attractions and may even contribute to a destination's pull factor (Bideci & Albayrak, 2016). Yet, churches are multifarious places, which may also be visited for their architectural design, history and cultural heritage. Churches provide a specific ambience, convey specific forms of aesthetics and provide extraordinary experiences of beauty. They are often inherently places of silence and may be visited for the specific kinds of moments they provide: moments of immersion and moments of escape.

This chapter focuses on churches as silent places that may provide travellers with moments of silence. The fact is that today we live in a world equal to 'decibel hell' (Chepesium, 2005), in noisy environments in which we constantly experience a wide range of sounds. Often this noise is unwanted to the point that it pollutes humans, adversely affecting human health. The travellers' desire to visit churches may indeed be a reaction to the current invasion of noise in day-to-day life. In the current era of noise pollution, silence has become something sought after, rare, unique and

exclusive—a luxurious experience in its most basic form (e.g. Kagge, 2017). While the positive effect of silence on human health is indisputable, it remains to be confirmed whether churches are places for contemporary travellers to pursue the experience of silence, even if only momentarily. These moments of silence may provide the traveller with an escape from noise and with experiences that may be treasured as luxurious. The aim of the study is to explore these moments of silence as experienced by the contemporary traveller. Thus, the study investigates how churches' atmospheres contribute to the experience of silence and what this experience means.

This chapter opens with background information on the counterparts of noise and silence. This discussion is followed by the study's qualitative empirical design and findings. The chapter concludes with the implications of the study's findings.

1. BACKGROUND

If one wishes to fathom silence, one must fathom noise as well (Prochnik, 2011). Phrases like 'decibel hell' and 'noise pollution' have emerged to describe today's world. If the twentieth century was the age of noise (Huxley, 2014), the twenty-first century is the age of din— with its urbanization and overpopulation of megacities with unthinkable noise levels (Frioux, 2017). Noise is measured in decibels along its sound pressure level. When confronted with a high and unpleasant sound pressure, there is a risk of experiencing harmful physiological and psychological effects (European Commission, 2008). The harmful effects of noise are recognised and noise is stressed as an essential public health issue. For example, the World Health Organisation's regional office for Europe has stressed that noise is one of the region's "top environmental risks to physical and mental health and well-being" (WHO, 2018).

Various definitions of silence exist, one being that silence is an absence of noise or speech (e.g. Ephratt, 2008). To enrich the understanding of silence, one can look to its historical context,

more specifically its western socio-cultural perspective. The introductory quote from Ecclesiastes not only highlights the importance of balance and timing of each phenomenon—speech and silence—but also hints at the future’s ‘break’ with silence and gradual creation of a complex sound systems for communication. Eventually, these systems led to speech, empowering and connecting people. The German novelist Thomas Mann captured this notion in 1924 in his influential novel ‘The magic mountain’ by writing that “Speech has become civilization. The word, even the most contradictory word, preserves contact—it is silence which isolates” (2005, p. 87). Silence, though, also has highly communicative functions in ‘linking’ people (Jensen, 1973): it can be revealing or judgemental, for example.

Human views on silence greatly differ from culture to culture. In some countries, silence is ‘golden,’ while in others, speech is more valued. The latter applies to many Western countries, like the United States, where people who fluently express themselves are often held in high regard (Ling, 2003). In Eastern countries, like Japan, such people are often denigrated as they are suspected of being procrastinators (Lebra, 1987). In the Ancient Orient, silent people or people who spoke infrequently were perceived as more trustworthy; whereas in the West, such people may be seen as unpleasant, if not rude. Yet, in Northern countries, like Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Norway, silence conveys interest and consideration. In these countries, silence is a means of encouraging the person with whom one is speaking to continue talking (Samovar et al., 2013). For Finns, in particular, silence is a characteristic cultural communication style and silence is expected, for example in such well-being places like Sauna (Olbertz-Siitonen & Siitonen, 2015).

Silence can also be viewed from a cultural-historical perspective. In China in the sixth century BC, Lao-tzu in the Tao Te Ching, reckoned: ‘Those who know do not speak; those who speak, do not know’ (Hoff & Timus, 1982). In Hinduism, silence is revered. Valuing it, spiritual

seekers look for it to acquire peace in order to reach the gateway to God. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Lord Shiva is described as the silent one. In Buddhism, silence is seen as an obvious reality, related to the paradox of what reality is. For Buddha, all things prevail because emptiness prevails. In that vein, Buddha remains silent to epitomise that reality. The Lebanese mystic Khalil Gibran, inspired by Islam, said that one starts talking when is not at peace with one's thoughts (Sim, 2007). For Quakers (members of a religious group with Christian roots), silence is the only condition in which one can feel the awesome and tragic dimensions of life, the sense of transcendence, and the presence and beauty of God. Quakers have been holding their worship in complete silence for four centuries (Sim, 2007). Christians also often crave silence when worshipping. Epitomizing this are the Trappist monks who, when become monks, take a vow of silence to create distance between themselves and the world, but also vow to use this silence to transform themselves, becoming more charitable and self-denying.

Silence is also associated with specific professions. Creative artists of various trades often search for silence, very much aware of how its presence fills their art. Musicians are familiar with silence as part of music composition. John Cage provides an extreme case of silence in music. In 1950, he composed three separate movements of different lengths made entirely of silence: thirty-three seconds; two minutes and forty seconds and one minute and twenty seconds (Revill, 2014). To Cage, there was no such thing as silence; he believed there would always be something noisy, however dim, taking its place (Revill, 2014). An analogy to Cage's music of emptiness is Kazimir Malevich's paintings, including his empty canvas within the white square on the white ground. The emptiness was equal to silence, asking viewers to explain what they see as they interact with the painting (Sim, 2007).

Drawing on the discussion above, two approaches to silence can be seen to coexist: the conservative and the transgressive politics of silence (Thompson, 2014). In the former, noise is considered ‘bad,’ while silence is considered ‘good’ as it implies reflection. In the latter, noise is seen only as contingent, relational and secondary. This means that noise is not assessed as unwanted—it may not even be perceived at all; such a perspective can be seen “to de-centre the listening subject” (Thompson, 2014, p. 47). These two approaches rely on a binary understanding (and a dualist hierarchy) of silence and noise.

In an attempt to deconstruct (Western) dualism, Jacques Derrida used the term *pharmakon*, meaning at once remedy and poison (Thompson, 2014). If one associates *pharmakon* only with poison, one would only have a partial understanding. This applies to silence, whereby silence is at once virtuous and vicious, a remedy and a weapon. It can be felt as oppressive and alienating, while noise can be felt as community and belonging. Essentially, not only has noise been used as a weapon—for example, as sound bombs or sonic boom air raids in 2005 in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, causing twenty miscarriages (McGreal, 2005)—but silence has also been used to mentally torture prisoners in solitary confinement

Having acknowledged the *pharmakon* of silence and noise, it is clear that in the twentieth century, more rather than less silence is needed, especially when the origins of the word ‘noise’ is understood. Noise comes from two Latin words: *nausea*, which means disgust or physical discomfort of the stomach, like seasickness; and *noxia*, which refers to hurt, harm or wrongdoing. Proceeding from that, since the beginning of industrialisation and its attendant assault against silence (Frioux, 2017), one might claim that societies have increasingly sickened themselves through noise (Stansfeld & Matheson, 2003; Yiming, Shuzeng, Selvin & Spear, 1991).

As a counteraction to the current invasion of noise, an increasing number of travellers are attracted to places ensuring experiences of silence: meditation retreats, like the Buddhist Vipassana Meditation Retreat in India; Catholic Trappist retreats in places like France and Ireland; hotels like Kartause Ittingen in Switzerland and remote places like the Lapland of Finland. Today silence is more and more difficult to attain and to experience—it is rare—yet due to its physical, mental and spiritual benefits, it is sought after as a means of rejuvenation. Because of its rarity, silence has by definition become a luxury, that is something unique and exclusive, perhaps affordable only to wealthy people. If that is the case, it follows that in Western countries, easily accessible places, like churches, could become traveller destinations providing experiences of silence and regeneration.

2. METHOD

The exploratory aim of this study is to show how churches' atmospheres contribute to the experience of silence and what moments of silence experienced in churches mean for the contemporary traveller. This requires detailed data; therefore, a qualitative semi-structured study was designed, comprising individual interviews. The benefit of such an approach is that it provides explanations, gives accounts of experiences and travellers' understandings, permits flexibility and allows the research process to naturally unfold. In particular, interviews provide detailed and comprehensive insights into the beliefs and feelings of individuals (McCracken, 1988; Rowley, 2012). As such, this qualitative approach with one-on-one interviews generated detailed and rich data (Brown, 2010).

2.1 Data collection and sample

For the study, a purposeful sampling technique was used. Informants were selected based on their potential to provide comprehensive and detailed insights to the research topic (Patton, 2002). Equally important, informants had to be available, willing (Spradley, 1979) and comfortable discussing the topic with the interviewer. In order to gain rich data, the informants needed to be as heterogenous as possible. The first sampling criterion was that informants were silent during their visit to the church (no chatting, murmuring, cell phones, nor praying, etc.). At this stage, visitors were observed. Second, only travellers were interviewed. Third, all informants were adults. The silent visitor was gracefully approached at the exit of the church, and only those visitors were interviewed for the study who fulfilled the two latter criteria. The conversation continued at the steers of the churches, and the discussion then turned into an interview, taking place at the forecourts of the churches. The informants were approached in *Basilique Notre-Dame de l'Assomption* in Nice, France, and in Westminster Cathedral (Metropolitan Cathedral of the Precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ) in London, England, during one week in the winter of 2019.

A thematic and focused guide was developed to direct the interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The guide outlined the primary themes in a consistent manner, interjected with probing questions to evoke more elaborate responses when necessary. The themes were chosen to provide insights into the meaning of silence and informants' experiences of silence. The themes included in this study were as follows: the meaning of silence and the experiences of silence in a church. Data was collected by one of the authors in order to ensure consistency in the interviews. The interviews were conducted in a conversational manner (Jamshed, 2014). After an introduction of the interviewee and interviewer, the reason for approaching the visitor and the topic and the purpose of the study, the discussion continued as an interview, but in a natural, conversational

manner. The informants were also assured anonymity. The interviews were initiated by asking informants to share their perceptions of silence, followed by questions about their experiences with and motivations for seeking silence and visiting the church during their travel. A guided development approach was employed, in which topics were raised and the discussion was steered based on the outline of the guide. This focused approach ensured that the interviews remained short, yet insightful, lasting approximately fifteen minutes each. The interviews ended when the interviewer felt that the subject had been thoroughly covered and the participants had clearly expressed that they had little more to share. Data collection continued until data and thematic saturation were reached—that is, when no new data or themes emerged (Morse, 1995). The interviews were ended by encouraging the informants to comment or add information in order to ‘move the participants out of the interview mode’. All sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

In total, twenty personal interviews were conducted (ten at Basilique Notre-Dame de l'Assomption, Nice, and ten in Westminster Cathedral, London; eight men and twelve women). The informants' ages ranged from 21 to 78 years, with an average age of 42.9 years.

2.2 Data analysis

The quality of the analysis was ensured through researcher triangulation (Denzin, 1978), whereby each researcher analysed the data individually. In the initial analysis phase, the data was classified and organised to extract information useful for research (Sullivan, 2001). Concepts and categories were framed (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The detected categories were assigned short yet descriptive labels that served to minimise interpretive effort in this regard. To generate an understanding of the meaning of silence, the data analysis in this phase was aimed at detecting

recurrent explanations. In the second phase, the data analysis continued to search for patterns that could provide further insights. Gradually, primary themes and conceptual patterns emerged to characterise silence. When the data analysis was complete, the researchers compared their findings to arrive at a shared interpretation and understanding of the primary themes, facets and features.

3. FINDINGS

The findings showed that silence is contextual and that churches are perceived as special places of silence. Below, conditions for silence set by the specific context are described. The findings also revealed what silence means for the traveller visiting a church during her/his holiday. Five themes were detected, and the findings showed that silence is considered (1) a code of conduct, (2) an inner state, (3) a break, (4) an empowering experience and (5) a precious moment.

3.1 The place of silence

Essentially, the informants stressed that silence is something that cannot be created. Yet, silence can evolve and can be experienced. Silence evolves within specific contexts, yet, the experience of it varies depending on the context. This means that silence in nature or in a library is not the same as silence in a church.

The informants stressed that for silence to occur, the place must allow the experience of silence. The specific place, that is the physical building—the church—was expressed as such a location that enabled silence to emerge. The informants talked about the architecture—the thick walls and the material (stones), which filter outside noise and preserves silence. Furthermore, silence was conveyed by social, physical and social-symbolic cues (e.g., Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2011) within the place. Informants mentioned that silence was encouraged by the social context,

including prayer (e.g., humbling), other visitors' silence and travellers walking or sitting alone or with family and/or friends. Silence was also conveyed by the interior design governed by physical cues, like light, candles, stained glass, architecture and building material, but also by the social-symbolic cues, like statues, sculptures and paintings. A Portuguese female visitor (26 years old) stressed:

[T]he walls and the lights, you know those small lights. Even if you have to pay for those lights, candles or whatever [...] the silence also. The good silence.

Informants stressed that the physical spaces of churches conveyed positive and 'good' silence, and 'good experiences' of silence. When the physical space was limited, as in small churches, silence was perceived as more intimate.

3.2 Silence is a code of conduct

Churches were expressed by interviewees as being places inherently associated with silence. It was something they expected. The interviews revealed that (the place—the studied) churches — holds an ambiance, which enables the silence to 'live' and to exist. An American woman (67) asserted, "Cathedrals were built to inspire silence." The place was also revealed as having a code of conduct outlining the rules of silence. "We are in the middle of silence [...] I thought for sure, we were gonna be silent here," was expressed by a Colombian traveller (48, male). A young Cape Verdean (23, female) said, "Silence comes naturally." Yet, she also pointed out that due to the code of conduct, the silence in churches is in some way artificial. Essentially, such silence is not definitive but rather relative.

Hence, silence in churches is not necessarily without sound. Informants pointed out that in a church, silence is in fact conveyed by 'small noises'. These are sounds one can hear, expressed

a Polish visitor. In a similar vein, churches, although associated with silence, were not perceived as silent places as such. Instead, the informants shared that silence was conveyed by the physicality and ambience of the place, as well as the code of conduct encouraging behaving in a particular manner.

3.3 Silence is an inner state of mind

Often silence was expressed as an inner state of mind: something one cannot share or divide. As such, the place, that is the visited church, is not necessarily a silent place per se. In fact, silence was not expressed as an absence of noise, as noted by a Japanese man (27):

You learn something important about silence in busy streets. You do not get silence from a quiet place. You get silence when you hear noise. You and your noise and [the noise of] people, that of people. Then, you can create silence.

Silence was expressed as something internal, and the church was seen as providing the means to experience such inner silence. A Colombian visitor (48, male) said, “Silence...is inside everyone. [...] Silence is inside each of us.” Inner silence was equated with an ability to quiet at once external and internal noises. This inner silence was expressed as a moment of meditation and as a moment of connecting with something better than oneself. It was expressed as a spiritual practice, although not necessarily religious, for which the church provided the perfect surrounding.

3.4 Silence is a break

Silence was expressed as a ‘break,’ as a disruption to something going on. A woman (68) stressed this, saying, “Silence is a break in my busy life.” A young man (21) also explained the need for silence as a break: “The break. I need a break before I dive into my adulthood.” He continued,

“[silence] helps to develop the spirituality to find oneself.” An American traveller (68, female) further asserted the importance of silence: “I can’t do it without silence. It helps concentration, to stay calm, to think, to make a break.” An Italian traveller (54, male) pointed out the effects of a break provided by the silence in a church:

I feel good and relaxed for ten minutes without my kids arguing all the time [laughing].

[...] It’s a place that unfogs my brain. I am stopped for ten minutes of my life. I have the impression of not getting old. That time stops. Silence gives you a break, a nice, wonderful break.

These quotes show how silence is viewed as a break, from whatever one is doing, and is a necessity for one’s well-being and for maintaining one’s physical and mental health.

3.5 Silence is an empowering experience

As the quotes above show, silence was expressed as an experience having consequences. An Italian traveller (48, male) said:

Silence allows us to be quiet, it’s good, relaxing, I forget my problems. [...] [Silence] quiets my mind. For everyone, I suppose. It calms my heart, it cleans everything.

Informants expressed that silence is relaxing, it helps one to think, it enables one not to think, it helps one to develop one’s ideas, it helps one to find oneself and it gives energy. A Spanish woman (48) said that silence is a necessity: “It brings you fresh ideas and you are calm and satisfied by life,” while a young French traveller (23, female) said that she needs the silence during her travel as it helps her to concentrate and relax.

Silence was clearly expressed as something necessary to be able to continue whatever the interviewee was doing in everyday life or during one’s holiday, as was the case for many of the

interviewed travellers. Not only as a short-term break, but as a means of gaining momentum to nourish one's life and to regenerate. Even a short moment of silence was stressed as something that enables oneself to live an empowered life, which touches upon a sort of self-mastery of one's well-being.

3.6 Silence is rare—luxurious travel experience

Overall, silence was expressed as something that is no longer common. Instead, it is perceived as something rare, valuable and explicitly sought after. Across the interviews, silence as an inestimable good came to the fore. As an architect and interior designer said, “Silence is a pricy good; as a matter of fact, to have silence in one's house, you need lots of money—to own a silent house, it is very expensive.” This statement bluntly illustrates how noise has become the norm and that to avoid it, one has to pay the price, reinforcing the notion that silence is a luxury. Evidently, not everyone has the means to afford such luxury living.

A holiday, and particularly travel, seemingly provides the time and the potential to experience silence, even if only moments of silence. One Italian father (54) travelling with two children narrated his need to visit the present church and the rarity of silence: “The calm, the absence of shouts, do you see them? [...] It is a precious good. It is good, rare, so it is precious. It is a precious silence.” He continued by saying that due to the constant noise in everyday life, silence has become a gift. Another Italian traveller (48, male) pointed out the rarity of silence and stressed that he doesn't need to search for silence; he knows he will find it in a church:

Silence is rare. More and more. It's precious. Ask someone to be silent. It's very difficult.

In church we are certain to be silent, to find silence. And it's good, yes.

Silence was equated to gold, something expensive. A female Japanese visitor expressed, “Silence is golden,” while another traveller said, in a similar vein, “Silence is gold, precious.”

In essence, the findings show that the experience of silence is not limited to a one-week visit to a meditation retreat. Instead, the interviewed travellers visited various churches explicitly to experience the atmosphere of the church and silence. As noted earlier, these short moments of silence are considered rare and highly valuable. Essentially, these luxurious moments of silence were expressed as something that regenerate, but above all, bring meaningfulness and a more significant purpose to life.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Today, tourism is one of the largest industries, as humans travel more than ever before. In a similar vein, the business of experience has great potential as humans are driven by experiences, and particularly by luxurious ones, which may be searched for in whatever humans do. Humans’ ‘luxury fever’ has not gone down but has, instead, changed in nature. People continue to desire luxury not only in brands, products and services, but also in experiences. Interestingly, with such experiences, the perception of luxury may not come from a luxurious setting, like a gold-plated pool. Instead, it may derive from something that is perceived as ‘golden’ and luxurious by the individual at a specific moment in a specific place. Thus, the experience of luxury does not necessarily require a materially luxurious offering or context; it can instead emerge from a lived experience or activity (e.g., Cristini, Kauppinen-Räisänen, Barthod-Prothade & Woodside, 2017; Kauppinen-Räisänen, Gummerus, v. Koskull & Cristini, 2019). In the current study the experience of luxury—a moment of silence—was enabled by the atmosphere of the churches; nothing that is necessarily luxurious per se. This study shows how a luxurious experience may come from a

moment of silence experienced in a church conveyed by its social, physical and social-symbolic cues.

Empowered by the ‘confessions’ of our interviewees, we were able to corroborate many of the findings in the existing literature on silence: the *pharmakon* nature of noiselessness, the multitude of meanings of silence and its perceived impact on humans’ mental and physical health. The findings show how silence is associated with a code of conduct, how silence is an inner state of mind, a break, an empowering experience, and above all it is something rare and thereby luxurious. Hence, what prevailed in the interviews was the massive craving for silence also during one’s holiday, as silence was perceived as an ‘endangered species’ given the ‘nauseous’ force of noise in society today. With the acknowledged ecological catastrophe of silence (Boerlijst, Oudman & de Roos, 2013) and its gradual disappearance, tourists seemed to cherish and treasure the experience of silence. As a consequence, silence naturally has transformed itself into an extraordinary luxury: free from the parasite of noise, silence can heal the tourist. Silence, in fact, revitalises the visitor by encouraging generosity and freeing the listener in allowing her/him to stop doing the thing what she/he is doing at the moment (Serres, 2013). To conclude, the study suggests that in addition to promoting destinations for their historically and culturally unique churches, these places could also be promoted as sites for experiencing moments of luxury during one’s holiday.

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