

The Practice of Silence and Solitude and its Results

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**Abstract**

Silence and solitude as a spiritual discipline is seen across many different worldviews including Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Humanism, and can be exercised alongside disciplines like prayer, meditation, and mindfulness. Each worldview has a unique purpose in why silence and solitude is practiced such as to commune with God, to prepare one's heart for times of prayer, to avoid suffering, to experience revelations, and to find peace in an anxious world. Loneliness stems from unmet expectations of social interactions that lead to aversion in one's current relationships and within themselves. Understanding the purpose of silence and solitude leads to the result of how, when practiced outside of its intended goal, the discipline can lead to loneliness.

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### **The Practice of Silence and Solitude and its Results**

The topic of this research is the spiritual discipline of silence and solitude. Silence and solitude is a spiritual discipline that has gained popularity in the past few years in the Christian atmosphere, however, it is something that has been practiced long before recent times. Not only is it a discipline that is prevalent in Christianity, but in other religions and moral doctrinal beliefs as well. Religions such as Islam, Buddhism, and followers of Humanism also prioritize silence and solitude in the form of meditation, prayer, or periodic isolation. This research looks at the background history of the practice of silence and solitude across various major religions. It compares topics such as what the discipline is, how it varies in different religions, and why it is seen as important for one's spiritual being. Along with this, research has been done on what the end goal of the spiritual discipline is in each of the major religions and what one can hope to gain from the practice. Research was then done on the topic of loneliness and how, if practiced without an end goal in mind, solitude may quickly turn into loneliness and negative isolation.

### **Defining the Terms**

Though often practiced together, silence and solitude are often defined as distinct terms and can be carried out individually. One of the main sources used for this research is a book by Donald S. Whitney called *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*.<sup>1</sup> For the foundation and base comparison of the research, Whitney's definitions of silence and solitude were used. He defines the discipline of silence as the "voluntary and temporary abstention from speaking so that

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<sup>1</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014).

certain spiritual goals might be sought.”<sup>2</sup> He then defines solitude as a spiritual discipline as the “voluntary and temporary withdrawing to privacy for spiritual purposes.”<sup>3</sup> These definitions did not limit the research to solely focusing on the Christian faith, which is why they were chosen to be used throughout the research process.

### **The Establishment and Practices of Silence and Solitude Amongst the Religions**

The first section focuses on the background of the major religions chosen and their relationship with silence and solitude. Researchers discovered when silence and solitude were first noticed and when it gained a deeper spiritual meaning in each religion. Special attention is paid to the emphasis of silence and solitude in Christianity, which can be seen through the life of Jesus. This is then compared with ideas such as meditation and periods of isolation or prayer that are emphasized in different religions. Though not an organized religion, the emphasis on silence and solitude in Humanism is also addressed as part of the research. Some of the questions that were addressed include: When was silence and solitude created or first conceptualized? What major religions practice silence and solitude? What are the major similarities and differences between silence and solitude in different religions? and What other spiritual practices are similar to silence and solitude? The similarities and differences between the meaning, practices, and other ideas on silence and solitude in each religion are the basis of this section of the research.

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<sup>2</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 2014), 224.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

### Origin of the Concepts

Silence and solitude are not concepts that are new to the modern world, however, the definitions and meanings of the words have changed regarding how they are practiced as disciplines. Merriam Webster Dictionary defines silence as the “forbearance from speech or noise; absence of sound or noise; absence of mention.”<sup>4</sup> Silence has been present since the beginning of eternity, or since it was able to be recognized by humankind. For someone to understand silence, they must understand that there is a difference between sound and the lack thereof. Yet even as silence is the absence of speech, sound, or noise, silence is still considered a means of communication amongst humans. A well-known saying about the power of silence says that “Silence speaks volumes.”<sup>5</sup> Words have power, but choosing silence instead of verbal communication also holds great power. In his book *The Power of Silence: Silent Communication in Daily Life*, Kenny Colum writes, “Silence is useful. Falling silent can be a means of learning about the world around us, or a powerful way of letting someone know what we feel. Silence is also a space in which to cultivate peace of mind and body. It is a defence against intrusion.”<sup>6</sup> Not only does he write that silence is useful, but also that it may be deadly, effective, and refreshing. In a world that is filled with noise, taking the time to both be silent and find a place that is silent is an intentional choice and not just an experience of a lack of noise.

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<sup>4</sup> “Silence Definition & Meaning,” *Merriam-Webster*, n.d., accessed February 5, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/silence>.

<sup>5</sup> “Quote by Anthony T. Hincks,” *Goodreads*, n.d., accessed February 5, 2024, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/11827356-and-he-said-silence-speaks-volumes-when-truth-is-spoken>.

<sup>6</sup> Colum Kenny, *The Power of Silence: Silent Communication in Daily Life* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), ix.

Solitude is a concept that is not new to the world, but also a concept that many seem to have different views on. In every religion being studied, there was a point of solitude for humans at the beginning of the creation narrative. In Christianity, God created man and woman, but not at the same time. First, God created man from dust from the ground and breathed the breath of life into his nostrils (Gen. 2:7, English Standard Version). At this point, the only human on earth was man. There was no existence of other humans, and man was alone. Though man was surrounded by both the presence of God and other animals, God recognized the solitude of man and said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him,” (Gen 2:18). Then out of the rib of man, woman was made. Solitude is a discipline that is well-known across the Christian faith, however, a distinction must be made between solitude and aloneness. God created humans to be in community, not just with Him, but also with one another.<sup>7</sup> Solitude is considered a discipline, yet the Lord considered man being alone to be “not good,” (Gen 2:18). Man being alone was not good, but later in the New Testament when there are examples of Jesus going to find solitude and be alone with the Lord, it is seen in a positive light and as an example for his followers (Mk. 6:30-32; Lk. 5:16; 6:12-13; 22:39-44). What is the difference between being alone and seeking solitude? Can one be bad, and the other be considered good? Does the motive of solitude have anything to do with whether it is considered good or bad? These are all questions to explore in the second section of the research.

Similarly, to the creation account in the Bible, the Qur’an of the Islam faith dictates that Allah created man from clay, and that a “mate” was created along with Adam from soil and

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<sup>7</sup> Sean Gladding, *Story of God, the Story of Us: Getting Lost and Found in the Bible* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2010), 27.



nature.<sup>8</sup> In this same sense, even if man was created before woman, he was not alone for long. Even across different religions, it is not good for man to be alone. Differently from both Christianity and Islam, Buddhism does not include a creation narrative because Buddha refused to answer questions regarding the creation of the universe, the creation of humans, or other metaphysical questions.<sup>9</sup> He saw these questions and the answers to them to be irrelevant to life both on earth and after death. Instead, the majority of the Tripitakas (the holy book of Buddhism) talks about how to treat the suffering of humans and how to live life in a way that is best for oneself and others: “For the Buddha the main concern of religion is salvation and he discovered that it could be found without delving into all of the mysteries of the world.”<sup>10</sup> Due to his emphasis on salvation and what to do in a suffering world, the Buddha does not offer clarity on both the creation of the world and the creation of human beings, so it is not known whether man or woman was in solitude at the beginning of the world. The first example of solitude in Buddhism was not found in a creation account, however, the canonical basis for living a solitary life comes from the Khaggavisana-sutta, which means the “Discourse of the Rhinoceros Horn.” In this discourse, every single one of the forty-one stanzas ends “with the same final line: ‘eko care khaggavisanna-kappo,’ which may be translated as ‘go alone like the horn of the

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<sup>8</sup> T.O. Shanavas, *The Quran and the Creation/Evolution of Human* (n.d.),

[https://www.academia.edu/90628636/The\\_Quran\\_and\\_the\\_Creation\\_Evolution\\_of\\_Human](https://www.academia.edu/90628636/The_Quran_and_the_Creation_Evolution_of_Human), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Buddhism, Christianity and the Question of Creation: Karmic or Divine?*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

rhinoceros.”<sup>11</sup> This discourse is seen as one of the major proofs that Buddhists should prioritize the practice of solitude in their lives.

In direct contrast to all these religions, the philosophy of Humanism argues that humans were not created by anyone or anything but came about by a process of evolution. Humanism holds no belief of any kind of God or higher power that has any influence over the world and things outside of it. Humans pursue earthly interests without the considerations of moral or religious contexts.<sup>12</sup> Because of this, most biological scientists and humanists believe that mankind “evolved from a long line of ancestors that were evermore less like ourselves as one goes back in time across previous generations.”<sup>13</sup> Humans evolved from mammals who had similar bone and brain structures that eventually matured into what is now known as the human being. In this ideology, it is unknown whether man or woman evolved first and how the other was created. There is much stipulation between whether woman was then evolved from man or whether they both evolved from mammals, as many evolutionary theories claim. Due to this, it is unknown whether man or woman ever existed apart from one another. It is unknown whether they were alone or forced to be in solitude until the other evolved.

Amongst the different views of creation as seen in Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Humanism, there is no common agreement of both how mankind came into existence and

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<sup>11</sup> Robert A. Paul, “Solitude in Buddhism and in Psychoanalysis: The Case of the Great Tibetan Yogi Milarepa,” *American Imago* 68, no. 2 (June 2011): 297–319, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aim.2011.0025>, 301.

<sup>12</sup> “Humanism - Definition, Meaning & Synonyms,” *Vocabulary.Com*, accessed March 7, 2024, <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/humanism>.

<sup>13</sup> Jon H. Kaas, “The Evolution of Brains From Early Mammals to Humans,” *WIREs Cognitive Science* 4, no. 1 (November 8, 2012): 33–45, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcs.1206>, 34.

whether man or woman was in solitude from one another at the beginning of their existence. Due to the many different findings, solitude can be seen as both something that was first experienced by mankind before they interacted with another human, and something that was experienced because of life circumstances. Yet despite the differences in when solitude was first experienced, each of the major religions or philosophies now incorporated the spiritual disciplines of silence and solitude in one manner or another.

### **Practices**

Silence and solitude are practiced in many different forms across different religions. In Christianity, silence and solitude are often seen as two different disciplines that are paired together to achieve a greater and deeper connectivity to God. Adele Ahlberg Calhoun is one author who believes the disciplines of silence and solitude are distinct from one another. Some of the methods she lists for silence include isolating oneself from sounds and speaking, driving without listening to a podcast, turning the television off, exercising without music, or having personal getaways of silence.<sup>14</sup> Creating space for silence is the disciplinary action that should lead to thoughts about God and growth in one's relationship with Him. Calhoun's methods for solitude include removing oneself from social contact, taking a retreat, observing the Sabbath, addressing one's internal addiction to being seen, doing physical activity by oneself, or practicing other spiritual disciplines alone.<sup>15</sup> Choosing to do things alone allows room for God to join in on whatever activity someone is performing. It is not truly doing anything alone because

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<sup>14</sup> Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 121.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

He is present in those moments. The methods that people use to carry out silence and solitude depend on their view of its belonging, or lack thereof, in the spiritual discipline category.

Many people of the Islamic faith also practice silence and solitude, specifically focusing on “silence of tongue and mind.”<sup>16</sup> They believe that silence is an incredibly important discipline due to their belief that the first revelation of God came to the prophet of Islam while he was in silence and solitude, about six kilometers away from the center of the city of Mecca.<sup>17</sup> Muslims who follow Islamic teachings are required to perform prayer in quiet places, with no noise or visual distractions. Silence and solitude is practiced in tandem with their prayers, however, they typically speak aloud when reciting their prayers. Dedicated Muslims are required to pray five different times throughout the day, as established by the practice of Muhammad. After Muhammed journeyed through the Seven Heavens, he encountered God, who commanded him and his followers to perform fifty prayers every day.<sup>18</sup> Seeing as this was too much, Muhammad haggles with God until the number of prayers per day is reduced to five. These five prayers are ritualistic prayers and do not include private, intercessory prayer, or du’a. When Muslims pray privately (du’a), it is often intercessory, “but it can also incorporate night devotions or vigils known as tahajjud.”<sup>19</sup> Before every time of prayer, a ritual washing (wudu) is required to be performed. Prayer is seen as a way to enter the divine world, and ritual washing is seen as a sign

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<sup>16</sup> Morteza Maddahi, “The Significance of Silence in Islamic Mysticism and Shi’a Hadith,” *Angelicum* 96, no. 1 (2019): 109–128, 109.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen R. Burge, “Prayer,” essay, in *Routledge Handbook of Islamic Ritual and Practice*, 1st ed. (London, 2022), 213–227, 214.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

of reverence and the ridding of sins before entering the divine world.<sup>20</sup> Night devotions (tahajjud) are another way to exercise silence and solitude in the Islamic faith: “The practice of night vigils (tahajjud) was a means for believers to devote themselves to God and to partake something of the divine realm.”<sup>21</sup> Yet in the same way that it is important for Muslims to find a place of solitude to perform their five ritual prayers, they also prioritize silence and solitude in their private intercessory prayers and their night devotions. Prayer is the main exercise of silence and solitude in the Islamic faith.

The discipline of solitude is regularly practiced in Buddhist tradition due to their belief that “attachment—the clinging of desire to an object in the world—leads inevitably to suffering.”<sup>22</sup> The opposite of attachment is detachment. Therefore, Buddhists believe that the best way to guard against attachment and suffering because of it, is to find solitude to detach themselves from the temptations of the world. Though many Buddhists take this in a literal manner of finding a place away from other people to practice silence and solitude, “the solitude on which the suttas insist is, in any event, an inner state of nonattachment, not necessarily just a condition of being without actual living companions.”<sup>23</sup> Buddhists practice detaching themselves from the objects of the world they live in by physically removing the objects from their lives or by removing themselves from whatever desire has a hold on them.

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<sup>20</sup> Stephen R. Burge, “Prayer,” essay, in *Routledge Handbook of Islamic Ritual and Practice*, 1st ed. (London, 2022), 213–227, 220.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>22</sup> Robert A. Paul, “Solitude in Buddhism and in Psychoanalysis: The Case of the Great Tibetan Yogi Milarepa,” *American Imago* 68, no. 2 (June 2011): 297–319, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aim.2011.0025>, 297.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

Similarly, Buddhists practice silence to both see the world rightly and to gain wisdom. Buddha's eye says "If we want to know who we are and touch the real, silent, deep nature of our life, we must be as we really are."<sup>24</sup> To do this, Buddhists are told to sit, to zazen. Zazen literally means "sitting meditation."<sup>25</sup> Meditation, or zen, is the most common form of silence and solitude in the Buddhist religion. Meditation is composed of specific practices of completely stopping thought and desire with the aim of the transcendence of ordinary states of mind.<sup>26</sup> In other words, meditation is the silence of the mind and heart. Silence and solitude as practiced through meditation include practices such as staying in the moment, being aware of one's breathing patterns, not judging others, not doing things, accepting who one is, and having no goals set for the time set aside.<sup>27</sup> Silence and solitude is most often practiced by Buddhists through meditation.

Humanistic philosophy that has increased in recent years, has begun to take notice of religious practices such as silence and solitude, prayer, and meditation. Many people have not been drawn to the religious reason that people practice such disciplines, but to the peace, calm, and joy that come because of it. Because of this, humanists have begun to practice the disciplines as well. Francesco Petrarch, one of the earliest humanists, wrote an epistolary treatise with the

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<sup>24</sup> Dainin Katagiri, *Returning to Silence: Zen Practice in Daily Life* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications Inc., 1988).

<sup>25</sup> "What Is Zazen," *Soto Zen Buddhist Association*, accessed February 6, 2024, <https://www.szba.org/what-is-zazen>.

<sup>26</sup> David L. McMahan, *Rethinking Meditation: Buddhist Meditative Practice in Ancient and Modern Worlds* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 64.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-68.

“intent to redefine religious solitude in terms of classical otium (active leisure).”<sup>28</sup> In this attempt, Petrarch already acknowledged how the discipline of solitude came from religious roots, however he made it his goal to shift its use to simply active leisure. Similarly, Patrick Leigh Fermor, author, and scholar, practiced the monastic regime without sharing the same beliefs as typical monks. When he first began the regime, he was deeply depressed and could not sleep. Yet after he adapted to the lifestyle, he slept better and woke with extreme energy and freshness like never before.<sup>29</sup> Humanists are more likely to practice meditation as a form of silence and solitude than say they are strictly practicing silence and solitude. As most people meditate, they aim to pay attention to their breath as it goes in and out and be aware of where their mind wanders because of it. This idea of meditation, they call mindfulness.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Purpose of Silence and Solitude**

The second section focuses on the end goal of practicing silence and solitude in each religion. Whether this be to grow closer to God or god(s), become connected with oneself, find inner peace, or other reasons that are to be found, the purpose of silence and solitude will be studied. The end goal of the practice in each religion will continue as either a similarity or a difference between the religions. Some of the questions addressed include: What is the purpose of silence and solitude in Christianity? What is the desired goal of practices like silence and solitude in other religions? Is silence and solitude something that requires continual growth or is

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<sup>28</sup> Susanna Barsella, “A Humanistic Approach to Religious Solitude,” essay, in *On Religious Leisure: De Otio Religioso*, 2002, 197–208, 199.

<sup>29</sup> Patrick Leigh Fermor, *A Time to Keep Silence* (NYRB Classics, 2007), xii.

<sup>30</sup> “How to Meditate,” *Mindful: Healthy Mind, Healthy Life*, accessed February 6, 2024, <https://www.mindful.org/how-to-meditate/#what>.

there a finalized end goal that can be reached? and, Is the end goal focused on oneself or a higher power? This section also includes examples of people who have practiced silence and solitude in their religion and what they feel they may have gained or lost from it. This section will touch on research studies and thoughts about the disciplines.

Silence and solitude in the Christian faith is a tool used to change the way people would typically communicate with God. In the United States specifically, society revolves around a fast and loud environment in which people never slow down. Silence and solitude create a space where someone learns “to converse with God and hear God—first in the solitude, then in all of life.”<sup>31</sup> Forcing oneself to sit in silence with the Lord allows the Lord to finally speak into the heart and mind of His child. It becomes a conversation between the person praying and God instead of one-sided statements where the Lord is never left time to respond. Slowing down to converse with God in solitude will lead to continuous communication in everyday life. Silence and solitude are also done to allow God into the innermost parts of someone’s being: “Quietude, which some men cannot abide, because it reveals their inner poverty, is as a palace of cedar to the wise, for along its hallowed courts the King in his beauty designs to walk... Priceless as the gift of utterance may be, the practice of silence in some aspects far excels it.”<sup>32</sup> Sitting alone in silence forces a person to come to terms with thoughts and emotions that they may not have dealt with in previous circumstances. Not only does it reveal those thoughts but invites the Lord to

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<sup>31</sup> Jan Johnson, *Solitude & Silence: 6 Studies With Notes for Leaders* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 9.

<sup>32</sup> Robert L. Plummer, “Are the Spiritual Disciplines of ‘Silence and Solitude’ Really Biblical?,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 2, no. 1 (May 2009): 101–112, <https://doi.org/10.1177/193979090900200106>, 102.



dwell within them. It is an opportunity to lay one's desires before Him and leave nothing hidden from His presence (Ps. 38:9). Followers of Christ need to "lean into God, trusting that being with him in silence will loosen your rootedness in the world and plant you by streams of living water."<sup>33</sup> The goal is to hand control over one's life to God, the One who created it.

In this practice of silence and solitude, there is not necessarily an end goal that can be reached. It is a repetitive practice in which the Christian should regularly meet with God to expose their inner thoughts, prayers, and heart to Him. The point of the silence is to focus one's mind on the Lord and things above (Col. 3:2). Christians believe that because of Adam and Eve's decision in the Garden to eat the fruit of the tree which God had commanded them not to, that every human is born into sin (Gen. 3; Eccles. 7:20; Rom. 3:10; 3:23; 5:19). Yet if someone confesses that Jesus is Lord and believes that God raised him from the dead, they will be saved (Rom. 10:9-10). When someone is saved, they enter a relationship with God, yet they will continue to mess up because they live in a sinful world. The important thing when a Christian messes up is to confess their sins to God, ask Him for forgiveness, and repent by turning in the other direction (1 John 1:9). One of the best ways to do this is to meet with God in silence and solitude by allowing Him to examine your heart (Ps. 139:24-24) and hand control back over to Him. Not only does it have a personal benefit in one's relationship with Christ, but it also benefits people's relationships with others: "God uses solitude and silence to change us—we bear

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<sup>33</sup> Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 123.

fruit, obey difficult commands and offer others selfless, Christ-driven love.”<sup>34</sup> Bearing fruit, obedience, and love are things that can only come from spending time with God. 1 Peter 5:6-7 reads, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.” God is the Creator and Ruler of all and the proper way for Christians to respond to that is by humbling themselves, which can be practiced through silence and solitude.

One of the main purposes of practicing silence and solitude in the Islamic faith is to help bring meaning and mindfulness to their prayer time: “Those who make a regular habit of quietly worshipping and remembering God know how focusing on their supplication makes it meaningful and helps bring mindfulness in prayer.”<sup>35</sup> Silence and solitude is not necessarily the discipline that they are aiming for, but it aids in their disciplines of mindfulness and prayer. A study was done on the mental health of Muslims who offer Salah prayer with mindfulness versus Muslims who offer prayer without mindfulness. Those who offered Salah prayer regularly had a significantly higher mental health than those who did not, but even more interestingly, those who offered Salah prayer with mindfulness also had significantly higher mental health as compared to those who were offering it without mindfulness.<sup>36</sup> This goes to show that the importance of

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<sup>34</sup> Jan Johnson, *Solitude & Silence: 6 Studies With Notes for Leaders* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 40.

<sup>35</sup> Morteza Maddahi, “The Significance of Silence in Islamic Mysticism and Shi’a Hadith,” *Angelicum* 96, no. 1 (2019): 109–128, 110.

<sup>36</sup> Shahid Ijaz, Muhammad Tahir Khalily, and Irshad Ahmad, “Mindfulness in Salah Prayer and Its Association with Mental Health,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 56, no. 6 (May 13, 2017): 2297–2307, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-017-0413-1>, 2297.

mindfulness and intentionality is significant in prayers of the Islamic faith. The main way that they practice mindfulness is through silence and solitude, which contributes to the idea that those who practice silence and solitude along with their Salah prayers are more likely to have a higher mental health.

If silence and solitude aids in bringing mindfulness and meaning to their prayer time, this is a goal that needs continual effort to reach. One will never reach a point in which their prayer time is perfect in the Islamic faith. Because of this, their effort to reach their goal in silence and solitude will also never reach a finalized end. Their use of this spiritual discipline is more focused on the person exercising it than on Allah, who they are praying to. Mindfulness as defined by attention or awareness is “attention to the present, full attention, presence, attention when doing, attention with intention, being aware / noticing, attention to different phenomena, observing, remembering, and concentration.”<sup>37</sup> Though the end goal of their prayers is to respond to and communicate with Allah, silence and solitude are simply a discipline that helps their minds and hearts focus on that prayer.

The reason that Buddhists practice solitude is based on the Buddha’s teachings that “make it necessary for human beings to become free of human desires in order to escape from the suffering that is part of life.”<sup>38</sup> Finding solitude from the things of this world encouraged detachment from the Buddhist believer. It encourages them to detach themselves from their

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<sup>37</sup> David Alvear, Joaquim Soler, and Ausiàs Cebolla, “Meditators’ Non-Academic Definition of Mindfulness,” *Mindfulness* 13, no. 6 (May 24, 2022): 1544–1554, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-022-01899-3>.

<sup>38</sup> Heidar-Ali Amini and Masihollah Nemati, “The Concepts of Solitude and Buddhism in Sohrab Sepehri’s Poetry,” *Language in India* 14, no. 2 (February 2014): 125–140, <https://doi.org/1930-2940>.

desires and wants of the world so that they will not face suffering because of their desires. Though they practice solitude to fulfill a command of the Buddha, they ultimately practice solitude to avoid their worldly suffering. It is a discipline that is focused on themselves rather than a higher power. This is a goal that does not have a finite end because until their life on earth ends, a Buddhist will never stop experiencing some kind of pain and suffering. Their mindset just may not be as focused on the suffering because they had taken the time to be in solitude from their desires.

The purpose of silence, however, is separate from that of solitude in the Buddhist practice. According to Buddha's teaching, "it is only through a quieting of one's mind that one can arrive at true insights; if there is noise (external noise and the noise of one's thoughts), one cannot see the true nature of things."<sup>39</sup> The main way to receive these insights is through meditation, which is accompanied by silence of the mind and outer world. The impact of silence in this sense does involve both the human practicing it and the Buddha. On one hand, a person cannot receive the insights of Buddha's unanswered questions if they do not practice silence in their meditations.<sup>40</sup> Yet on the other hand, the Buddha is the one who has the choice to reveal the answers to their meditations if he so wishes. This does seem to be an end that can be reached in accordance with silence and solitude. If the Buddha wishes to reveal his unanswered questions to

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<sup>39</sup> Orsolya Huszár, "The Role of Silence at the Retreats of a Buddhist Community," *KOME* 4, no. 2 (2016): 59–73, <https://doi.org/10.17646/kome.2016.25>, 64.

<sup>40</sup> Troy Wilson Organ, "The Silence of the Buddha," *Philosophy East and West* 4, no. 2 (July 1954): 125–140, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1397523>, 125.

a person in their meditations, they will have reached the purpose with which they were meditating in the first place.

In a humanistic ideology, there can be many different reasons that one would take part in silence and solitude or meditative practices. Humanists have “common cultural and scholarly ideal, but no common philosophical or theological doctrine.”<sup>41</sup> Since humanists hold no common theological or philosophical doctrines, they do not have a common reason for practicing meditation. The ideas of silence and solitude and meditation all come from different religions in which people are trying to commune with their God or complete something that their God has asked them to do. Humanists on the other hand, are more likely to practice meditation for the emotional benefits that it may provide. In a study done on the motivation behind practicing meditation, the overwhelming majority of participants “reported practicing mindfulness to alleviate emotional distress.”<sup>42</sup> If the reason humanists choose to practice silence and solitude is for emotional health, that has more to do with themselves than any greater good. This is consistent in the fact that they do not hold to any theological or philosophical beliefs.

This act of silence and solitude for emotional benefit is something that will be a continuous process for those who practice it. There will always be different trials and stressors of life, so practicing these disciplines will aid in whenever those times do come. In a study done on physicians and nurses, data was collected on whether meditation helped in situations of burnout

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<sup>41</sup> Paul Oskar Kristeller, “Humanism,” *Minerva* 16, no. 4 (1978): 586–595, <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01100334>, 589.

<sup>42</sup> Christopher A. Pepping et al., “Why Do People Practice Mindfulness? An Investigation Into Reasons for Practicing Mindfulness Meditation,” *Mindfulness* 7, no. 2 (February 4, 2016): 542–547, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-016-0490-3>.

compared to control subjects. It was found that “at 12 weeks, the meditators had statistically significant improvement in all measures of burnout and in nearly all attributes of EWA.”<sup>43</sup> EWA stands for Emotional Wellness Assessment, which all subjects took at both the beginning and end of the study. According to this study, meditation alone assisted in managing burnout and overall emotional wellness. Silence and solitude are not a long-term solution in the eyes of humanists; however, it is a strategy that can help one to cope with the anxieties that come.

### **Loneliness as a Result of Silence and Solitude**

The third and final section of the research focuses on loneliness because of improperly practiced silence and solitude. It begins with a discussion on loneliness including what loneliness is, what the symptoms of it are, and how something can lead to or result in loneliness.

Distinctions are made between loneliness and solitude. A comparison is then made between people’s experiences with loneliness and their religious beliefs and practices. Is there a correlation between loneliness and silence and solitude? Does the supposed correlation have anything to do with improperly practiced silence and solitude? Does loneliness come because of not meeting the end goal of silence and solitude in one’s religious beliefs? These questions serve as a basis and guide for what is addressed in the final section of research.

### **A Comparison Between Loneliness and Solitude**

To fully understand the definition and impact of loneliness, one must first understand its history and origin. When the term first began to be commonly used around 1800, it simply meant

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<sup>43</sup> Jayaram Thimmapuram et al., “Effect of Heartfulness Meditation on Burnout, Emotional Wellness, and Telomere Length in Health Care Professionals,” *Journal of Community Hospital Internal Medicine Perspectives* 7, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 21–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20009666.2016.1270806>.

“oneliness.”<sup>44</sup> In this context, it was more of a physical description rather than an emotional one. It described the state of a person or thing being by itself, or alone. It was originally seen as a religious experience for a person to commune with God in solitude, yet later became a negative emotional state. In the development of whole-person transformation, which includes someone’s emotional, physical, intellectual, social, moral, and spiritual life, loneliness has a proven impact on each area. Yet every area of whole-person transformation is connected. When someone is experiencing loneliness in their emotional life, it does not just stay contained to their emotions, it also impacts every other area of their well-being. Keeping this in mind, many things from someone’s holistic development can lead to loneliness in other areas.

Though loneliness has been compared to oneness and the state of being alone, this feeling goes far beyond just a physical state of not being around people. In fact, many people have reported feeling lonely even when surrounded by a group of people. So, what are the emotions that one experiences when considering themselves lonely, despite their current physical state? Some of the facets to loneliness include feelings of abandonment or emptiness that comes with a lack of intimacy or relationships; the perception that a person knows they are experiencing their own loneliness; emotional aspects that come with loneliness, which include, frustration, sadness, shame, melancholy, or desperation; and the person’s subjective evaluation about the quantity and

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<sup>44</sup> Fay Bound Alberti, *A Biography of Loneliness the History of an Emotion* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

quality of their current social relationships.<sup>45</sup> Even a person's evaluation of their own relationships is dependent upon the parents they were raised by, the environment and location in which they were raised, their personality, their uncontrollable life events, and more. If someone considers themselves to be lonely, it is not only due to the symptoms they are experiencing, but also how they perceive those symptoms to affect them. For this research, loneliness will be defined as "the aversive state experienced when a discrepancy exists between the interpersonal relationships one wishes to have, and those that one perceives they currently have."<sup>46</sup> This definition includes the emotional response one has to feelings of loneliness, the reason behind which one feels they are experiencing loneliness, and the importance of the perception of one's current state that impacts their view on their loneliness. This is an all-encompassing definition, which is why it will be used for the remainder of the research.

As defined earlier, solitude as a discipline is "voluntary and temporary withdrawing to privacy for spiritual purposes."<sup>47</sup> One of the major differences between solitude and loneliness is that solitude is voluntary whereas loneliness is not. Loneliness is the feeling one experiences because of their expectations of social relationships not being met. Solitude is the choice that someone makes to withdraw for spiritual purposes. In a study with college students researching

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<sup>45</sup> Javier Yanguas, Sacramento Pinazo-Henandis, and Francisco Jose Tarazona-Santabalbina, "The Complexity of Loneliness," *National Library of Medicine* 89, no. 2 (n.d.), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.23750%2Fbam.v89i2.7404>.

<sup>46</sup> Liesl M. Heinrich and Eleonora Gullone, "The Clinical Significance of Loneliness: A Literature Review," *Clinical Psychology Review* 26, no. 6 (October 2006): 695–718, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2006.04.002>.

<sup>47</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 2014), 225.



how the quantity and quality of social relationships have an impact on loneliness, researchers found that satisfaction ratings of social relationships were better data in predictors of loneliness as compared to frequency of contact.<sup>48</sup> College students who were out in public and hanging out in groups of people were not necessarily more likely to experience less loneliness, it is dependent on the satisfaction that college students have in those relationships that determines whether they are lonely or not. Loneliness is typically viewed negatively, whereas solitude and aloneness are not: “In fact, whereas loneliness is by definition an undesirable condition, aloneness or solitude may actually be a desirable or positive condition fostering creativity, facilitating self-reflection, self-regulation, identity formation, concentration, thinking, and learning.”<sup>49</sup>

### **The Purpose of Silence and Solitude as it Relates to Loneliness**

The distinction of whether someone will experience positive solitude or negative loneliness because of the spiritual discipline of silence and solitude can then be measured by their quality of satisfaction as they enter that time. If someone feels forced or pressured to practice silence and solitude, they may not feel the quality of satisfaction that would lead to enjoyment in the activity. Instead, they may experience feelings of sadness, frustration, shame, or abandonment that would point to signs of loneliness. To determine whether the practice of silence and solitude in each system of belief (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Humanism) will lead to loneliness, the purpose of the practice needs to be studied considering the descriptives of loneliness.

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<sup>48</sup> Liesl M. Heinrich and Eleonora Gullone, “The Clinical Significance of Loneliness: A Literature Review,” *Clinical Psychology Review* 26, no. 6 (October 2006): 695–718, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2006.04.002>.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

As previously discussed, the purpose of practicing silence and solitude in the Christian faith is to commune in a relationship with God and hand over the control of one's life to Him. As a person chooses to accept God's gift of salvation and commit to following Him, it is not just a one-time decision. The decision to hand one's life over to be saved by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9) is the first time that someone may choose to hand their life over to God, but it is only the precedent for the decision to continuously lay one's life down for Him and for others (1 John 3:16). If a Christian chooses to hand their life back over to God through the discipline of silence and solitude, they do so because of trust that they have in Him. Someone would not give their life, or anything valuable, to someone that they do not trust. Jeremiah 17:7 reads, "Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord." The Christian Standard Bible version says that the person who trusts in the Lord and whose confidence is the Lord is blessed. When someone's trust and confidence are in God, they have satisfaction in the quality of their relationship with Him. They know that He will be faithful, and He is dependable, and therefore trustworthy.<sup>50</sup> You do not have satisfaction in a relationship with someone that you do not trust. Therefore, if silence and solitude are practiced in the Christian faith with the intent of being in relationship with God and trusting Him with one's life, it will not lead to loneliness. Loneliness exists when there is a discrepancy between the relationships that one wishes to have and in relationships that one believes one currently has. This discrepancy is not possible if the person entering silence and solitude with God fully trusts Him and has confidence in Him to hand over their life to Him.

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<sup>50</sup> Chad Brand, *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary: The Complete Guide to Everything You Need to Know about the Bible* (Nashville, Tennessee: Holman Reference, 2015).

The purpose of silence and solitude in the Islamic faith is to bring mindfulness to their prayer and meditation time. The main ways that Muslims connect with Allah is by prayer and meditation, yet the way that they bring mindfulness and intentionality into those times is through silence and solitude. Though the purpose of their prayer and meditation is to connect with Allah, the purpose of the way that they practice silence and solitude has more to do with preparing themselves for that time than connecting with Allah. Depending on whether silence and solitude are practiced with the correct motive or not in the Islamic faith, it could lead to loneliness, or it could not. If someone is practicing silence and solitude to prepare their heart for meditation and prayer with Allah by focusing on him and on their relationship with him, it could increase their feelings of belonging in that relationship.<sup>51</sup> As discussed previously, those who offered Salah prayer with mindfulness had a higher mental health than those who offered Salah prayer without mindfulness. Yet in the same way, if someone enters silence and solitude with an expectation of meeting Allah in communion there when it truly just serves as a preparation for the heart, they could experience loneliness in the letdown of expectations: “A lower sense of belongingness is associated with depression, anxiety, and loneliness.”<sup>52</sup> If the person is simply practicing silence and solitude to prepare their own heart but is not doing so to prepare for prayer and intimacy with Allah, they could have a lower sense of belongingness, which leads to loneliness.

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<sup>51</sup> Justin Parrott, “How to Be a Mindful Muslim: An Exercise in Islamic Meditation,” *Yaqeen: Institute for Islamic Research* (2017), 9.

<sup>52</sup> Liesl M. Heinrich and Eleonora Gullone, “The Clinical Significance of Loneliness: A Literature Review,” *Clinical Psychology Review* 26, no. 6 (October 2006): 695–718, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2006.04.002>.

The purpose of solitude for Buddhists is to detach themselves from their worldly desires so that they will not experience worldly suffering. Buddhists believe that their attachment to worldly desires is what breeds suffering in their lives, so taking the time to be in solitude from those things prevents suffering that could have resulted as a part of them. This purpose is completely focused on oneself. If loneliness stems from a discrepancy in interpersonal relationships that one wishes to have and that one does not currently have, this purpose of silence and solitude can lead to loneliness. If someone desires to have deep and intimate relationships with people yet sits in solitude to detach themselves from their desires so that they do not have to face suffering because of them, they are unintentionally causing more loneliness than where they would have been originally. Their form of solitude is to move away from their connectivity to things and to cause separation between them, which could result in loneliness in the relationships they wish to cultivate.

Similarly, the purpose of silence in a Buddhist's life is to quiet both the outside world and one's inner mind so that they can receive revelations from the Buddha about creation and the nature of the world. If a person silences their mind and truly receives the answers to their questions from Buddha, it could increase the intimacy felt with him. This would decrease their feelings of loneliness as a result. Yet if the person is simply silencing their mind so that the Buddha can answer their questions and chooses not to reveal those answers, it could lead to loneliness and a lack of connectivity between the Buddhist and the Buddha. If someone enters silence and solitude with the expectations that they will not face as much suffering and that they

will receive the answers to their questions because of the practice, they may experience increased loneliness when these expectations are not met.<sup>53</sup>

Humanists practice methods of silence and solitude and mindfulness to alleviate stress and find ways to cope with burnout. Everyone faces struggles and anxieties in everyday life. It is impossible for someone to avoid all stress or struggle in life. Because of this, humanists practice silence and solitude to cope with stresses, yet not in a way that connects them with others. If someone chooses to practice silence and solitude to take time and space to process through the emotional anxieties of life, it could aid in their emotional health. However, it could also result in loneliness because their expectations for the impact of silence and solitude within their relationship with themselves could go unmet. If someone practices meditation for the sake of themselves and the meditation does not aid in relieving stress, they could simply be sitting in isolation with no true benefit. This isolation would later lead to loneliness: “Loneliness may undo both mental balance and clarity, resulting in conscious and subconscious stress. In contrast, desired solitude may reduce stress, enhance mental balance and clarity.”<sup>54</sup> The reason that humanists practice solitude is for themselves and not for any enhanced relationship, therefore, loneliness could result by simply avoiding other people without a greater purpose. If someone is simply getting alone because they think it will solve their problems, this will lead to loneliness.

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<sup>53</sup> Samia C. Akhter-Khan et al., “Understanding and Addressing Older Adults’ Loneliness: The Social Relationship Expectations Framework,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 18, no. 4 (November 2, 2022): 762–777, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916221127218>.

<sup>54</sup> Daniel M. Campagne, “Stress and Perceived Social Isolation (Loneliness),” *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics* 82 (May 2019): 192–199, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.archger.2019.02.007>.

Yet if someone desires solitude and this desire is met, it will lead to greater satisfaction and happiness within themselves.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the purposes of silence and solitude as practiced in different religions and ideals of life have a major impact in whether they result in loneliness. Silence and solitude are not just practiced in and of itself, but also alongside disciplines such as prayer, meditation, and mindfulness. This helps to define the purposes of silence and solitude in each philosophy of life such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Humanism. Examining the purposes behind practicing the discipline in each of the philosophies then sheds light on whether the execution of that purpose leads to loneliness. Loneliness has everything to do with the feelings that are associated with unmet expectations of relationships with people or the lack of those relationships. Because of this, the purpose behind practicing silence and solitude in each philosophy reveals whether the practice results in loneliness. If the purpose is not fulfilled, silence and solitude lead to loneliness.

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