

SILENCE, CONSCIOUSNESS, AND GOD

Inner stillness is an experience of pure silence. It is simple, it is whole, it is one; and thus human judgment clamors to keep us from it and so protect our paradoxical life of self-imprisonment within the well-defended boundaries of our alienated selfhood. Pure silence is conscious awareness of pure Being, free from the veils of ignorance and distractedness, beyond the confines of all limited thoughts and feelings. Of course, strictly speaking, we should not say “awareness of pure Being,” because the experience of Being is unitary; consciousness is not split into a subject that is aware of an object. We do not experience being conscious of Being; we enter into a state of pure Being, pure consciousness. We are conscious, yet not conscious of anything. The transcendental Self of which Merton writes is awake within itself. Merton attempts to describe this state of pure consciousness as follows:

It starts not from the thinking and self-aware subject but from Being, ontologically seen to be beyond and prior to the subject-object division. Underlying the subjective experience of the individual self there is an immediate experience of Being. This is totally different from an experience of self-consciousness. It is completely non-objective. It has none of the split and alienation that occurs when the subject becomes aware of itself as a quasi-object. The consciousness of Being. . . is an immediate experience that goes beyond reflective awareness. It is not “consciousness of” but pure consciousness, in which the subject as such disappears.

One might equally well say that the *object* as such disappears, because, as Merton writes, our awareness has become “completely non-objective.” I think Merton prefers to emphasize the disappearance of the subject so that his description does not suggest narcissistic self-absorption. Merton distinguishes pure consciousness from self-absorption by saying that in pure consciousness “. . . the self is not its own center and does not orbit around itself; it is centered on God, the one center of all, which is ‘everywhere and nowhere,’ in whom all are encountered, from whom all proceed.”¹

Over time, the repeated experience of pure consciousness, free from the restricting boundaries of egoism, leads to a state in which it is maintained even outside of our periods of prayer or meditation. As it becomes permanent, we experience God’s grace flooding our soul and making us whole. As we rest in God, we are content to let God’s will be expressed through us. Peter of Celles, a 12th Century contemplative, bishop, and author, writes: “God works in us while we rest in Him. Beyond all grasping is this work of the Creator, itself creative, this rest. For such work exceeds all rest, in its tranquility. This rest, in its effect, shines forth as more productive than any work.”²

The purity of inner silence reveals the wholesome oneness of life; it is a worthy womb suitable for the birth of the Word of God. In its unity the voice of human judgment has been laid to rest, and, in wholeness and in peace, we are free to listen without distraction to the voice of the Holy Spirit. Inner silence enables us to pray always, to commune ceaselessly with the infinitely generous Source of all life and love, and to carry out in every moment his redeeming will for the unification of all things in Christ (Eph 1:10).

The call to wholeness—to perfection—is ultimately a call to live a supremely simple life of total forgiveness. Overlooking our belief in sin and separateness, God awakens us into consciousness of his all-pervading love. When we rise from our tormented dreams of judgment and extend our forgiveness to include all that we encounter, we experience freedom

from alienation, freedom from boundaries—and the eternal life of unbounded love is ours. St. Paul depicts this extraordinary fullness when he prays “that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:17-19).

The utter fullness of God is the infinite ocean of love towards which all streams of prayer flow, however close or far they may be. Whether our prayers are like broad rivers flowing in peace across the plains or like rivulets chattering down a mountainside, their ultimate goal remains the same: the great Sea of Life who is their ultimate source, the infinite “fountain of living water,” (Jer 17:13). In prayer we seek to be drawn to the source of our being, to discover our true self in God, so that we may be whole and free from sorrow. We pray to be made pure by the outpouring love of God so that we may stand before his throne and serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness all the days of our life (Ps 124:4; Lk 1:75). We pray that we may become united with God and bring his life of freedom, love, and unity to all his children throughout the world. We pray that the perfect peace of God may reign in all creation. And the perfect Prince of Peace shall reign when we but keep silence before Him.