

AN EXCERPT FROM

PRAYER:
A NEW ENCOUNTER

BY

MARTIN THORNTON

AUTHORIZED REISSUE



AKENSIDE PRESS

60 AKENSIDE ROAD RIVERSIDE, IL 60546

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First British edition, 1972
by Hodder and Stoughton London

First US edition, 1988,
by Cowley, Cambridge, MA

Printed and bound in the United States
in 11 pt Baskerville type
by Minuteman Press of Lyons, Rose and Steve Bortman

To
MONICA
My Wife in
The Trinity

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FOREWORD
to the 1972 edition
by John Macquarrie

Prayer, worship, spirituality—these constitute a major problem for the church today. For many people, the traditional forms seem to have gone dead. Yet a purely secular or religionless Christianity has proved itself to be sterile, and there is plenty of evidence among the younger generation of a search for a viable spirituality.

Can the Church respond to this search? In the present book, Dr Thornton shows us what such a response might be—a response that is intellectually honest and that takes both contemporary theology and the contemporary world seriously. I am especially pleased that Dr Thornton has drawn so much on my own theological work in the writing of his book. His profound knowledge of ascetical theology has enabled him to draw implications from my work of which I was not aware myself, though for the most part I think these are consonant with my intentions.

While this book breaks new ground in spirituality, Dr Thornton is well aware of the continuing value of the tradition, provided that we penetrate behind the conventional stereotypes to the living realities. “Any genuinely new spirituality,” he writes, “will contain ancient elements within it, but reinterpreted and reformed.” I believe that this book will make a major contribution to one of the great needs of our time.

FOREWORD
to the 1988 edition
by John Macquarrie

It was in the nineteen-sixties that I first met Martin Thornton. He was on a visit to the United States from St Deiniol's Library [now called Gladstone's Library], and offered a "quiet day" in one of the New York churches. A quiet day is always valuable, but amid the strains of life in New York City, such a day has at least twice the value it has anywhere else. That was especially true at the time of his visit, when radical theologians were extolling the virtues of the secular and even questioning the reality of God, so that one began to wonder whether there was still any value in prayer and worship.

The quiet day did indeed offer an occasion for thought and reflection, but it certainly was in no sense a time when everything stood still. On the contrary, we were being challenged by new thoughts about Christian spirituality. We were being asked to accept the modern world and modern thought, and to rethink the spiritual life in the new context, for it is in this context that we all have to live. At that time Fr Thornton had just written a book which he called *The Rock and the River*. The rock is the abiding truth of Christian faith, the river is the constantly flowing stream of new ideas, new customs, new institutions that arise in human history. Fr Thornton saw the necessity of establishing communication between them. He believed that priority must still be given to prayer and study, but that these cannot just be taken over from the past but must be related to the world as it is today.

Not only did I greatly profit from this quiet day, it was also the occasion when I formed with Martin a friendship that lasted until his death more than twenty years later. I was privileged to have many conversations with him and to be allowed to share his new thoughts on prayer and the spiritual life. It was in 1972 that he showed me the typescript of his new book, *Prayer: A New Encounter*,

now being reissued. He greatly honored me by asking me to write a brief foreword to that first edition, because he had to some extent drawn on my own theological writings in his quest for a dialog between Christian spirituality and modern thought. I believed—and still believe—that his book touches on some of the deepest needs of our time. Christianity without prayer, without adoration, is sterile; on the other hand, prayer that is not firmly inserted into the context of contemporary life is beating the air.

Martin Thornton had the vision of healing this breach in Christian discipleship, and this book shows how he went about realizing the vision. May this new edition continue to help forward the work to which he devoted himself in his lifetime.

Personal Preface

Modern theology is an ancient concept, since every age has to make its own reappraisal and practical application of the faith once delivered to the saints. Sometimes this development takes the form of a gentle unfolding of tradition; sometimes, as is the case today, it is a radical upheaval. The present generation of Christians must learn to live with chaos, more positively they must grasp and live their faith in a spirit of adventure and experiment. The honest conservative who decries current trends may be fulfilling a useful purpose; nostalgia for a more comfortable past is a defiance of providence.

Much attention is being given to theological restatement, to new pastoral method, fresh means of communication, and experiment with liturgical and devotional patterns. Yet we are only beginning to appreciate that this is leading to a new literary form. The new style of theological writing appears to have three main qualities derived not from fashion but from the heart of contemporary theology itself. The first is a sane empiricism, even a subjectivism, by which the writer is permitted, or claims, considerable freedom in drawing upon his personal faith and experience. A few decades ago a theological writer could only propound an original idea—if he was ever bold enough to admit of one—by propping it up with as many references as he could dig out of Christian history. His idea was only acceptable if he could prove that St Augustine, or St Bonaventure, or William Temple, or preferably all three, had once said something very like it. The criterion of value was “objective” scholarship and its aim was the exposition of “objective” truth. We now see that theology can only arise from the experience of personal faith within the community of faith and that if the old-time scholar pushes his objectivity far enough he becomes a religious philosopher not a theologian.¹ The contemporary theological

1. John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (S.C.M. Press, 1966, rev. ed. 1977), pp. 1-4.

target changes from propositional truth to that which explains, interprets and guides faith-experience. All this derives from prevailing “existentialism,” and whether we claim or disclaim this ambiguous label its influence cannot be discounted. Writing of the father of this movement, Roger L. Shinn says: “In true existentialist manner he derides the practice of separating the writing from the writer.”¹ “Objectivity” was no goal for Kierkegaard.

As so often happens this new movement, with its new style of writing, turns out to have close associations with something very old indeed. We have learned that the Bible itself is no objective record of events and sayings, no set of revealed propositions, no manual of morals and no biography of Jesus. It is an intensely personal interpretation of the experience of the biblical writers from within the community of faith. St Augustine’s *Confessions*, the poems of St Francis, St John of the Cross, and John Donne, the *Revelations of Julian of Norwich*—not to mention Margery Kempe—are all deeply personal works in existential idiom. The hard core of ascetic theology comes down to us in the classic forms of community *regulae*, personal instruction, letters of direction and spiritual autobiography. It is deeply personal.

Secondly, and an incentive to this new writing, is the expansion of lay participation in all aspects of Church life, including the theological. The lay-theologian is nothing new but a new public has arisen which demands serious practical theology in a readable and relevant form. This demand is not for simple, or “popular,” or non-technical writings—though it can well dispense with the esoteric jargons of academic vogue—but rather for practical theology of the broad sweep for educated Christians instead of the detailed minutiae of specialized scholarship. The need is for faith speaking to faith, with its

1. Roger L. Shinn, *The Existentialist Posture*, from *Restless Adventure: Essays on Contemporary Expressions of Existentialism*, (Scribner’s Sons, 1968), p. 49.

personal element; for theology growing out of reflective experience leading to a reinterpretation of experience.

A third quality of the new writing is its emancipation from convention, from respectability. Alan Watts' important and much-quoted *Beyond Theology*¹ is a good example of this style, but I doubt if it would have been accepted by a reputable publisher thirty years ago. *The Art of Godsmanship* would never have been permitted as a subtitle for a serious work of theology, yet recently no less than the Lady Margaret Professor of Oxford called a book *God Talk*.² Even after making the indisputable point that this is a fair translation of the word "theology," I can imagine a staid sub-editor wishing to replace it by the subtitle *An Enquiry into the Principles of Religious Language*. This new approach is neither gimmick nor fashionable sloppiness, for behind it lies a vital principle. The theological author is no longer a cipher expounding objective truth but a person trying to guide others in the interpretation of a shared faith; his aim is not to instruct but to stimulate and inspire. This involves a personal and pastoral relationship between writer and reader, which is better served not by the style of the pedagogue but of the conversationalist or letter-writer. The style has certain precedents: I Corinthians hardly qualifies of a PhD. The time may come when the latest study in eschatology—heavensmanship—starts after the manner of *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*: "I was just going to say, when I was interrupted . . ."

Apart from its content and subject matter, this book is something of an experiment. I shall do my best to avoid two pitfalls which confront any writer: the slavish attempt to copy of the style of another writer, and the self-conscious effort to create a "style" of one's own. It would be foolish indeed to ape Watts, let alone Oliver Wendell Holmes, but although this is to be a speculative commentary on the work of another I shall try to

1. Hodder and Stoughton, 1964.

2. John Macquarrie (S.C.M. Press, 1967).

remain true to the three principles just considered. I can think of nothing quite so depressing as my spiritual autobiography, and I do not intend to write it, but I shall not be frightened of personal experience. I am writing from faith to faith, from my own faith to that of others, and although I should be the last to put too much value on religious feeling I doubt if any faith could survive from long without some of it. I shall try to write directly to the faithful, to my blood brothers and sisters in Christ, and not to some objective idol floating about in the academic air. I shall try to avoid the sillier sort of jargon that can be such fun in the senior common room and meaningless anywhere else. On the other hand I shall not assume the twentieth-century laity to be in the theological kindergarten: those who are do not read books.

I shall relax. If the book takes on a conversational sort of style then I shall deem it a successful outcome. If I fail in these background objectives it might still be worthwhile to have stated the ideal, and to have insisted that it is an ideal for others to aim at not a defect to be avoided.

Having said all that I make no apology for introducing this present book with critical references to some of my former work: it is the simplest way to do it. I spent practically the whole of my last book¹ trying to explain what the ambiguous phrase “pastoral-theology” really means, and it has only just occurred to me that this new style of theological writing is the obvious and necessary vehicle for its expression. Conversely, more and more theology is moving from the academic towards the pastoral form, and it might be worthwhile to summarize my main conclusions as to what this means.

First, pastoral-theology is an approach rather than a subject. It is closely allied to prayer and religious experience and attempts to bring out the practical implications of any branch of divine learning. A study in patristics can be pastoral-theology and a book on preaching can be thoroughly academic.

1. *The Function of Theology* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1968).

Secondly, pastoral-theology is the complement, ally and interpreter of “academic” theology. Within the totality of the Church’s mission the two are inter-related not in opposition, and even the most esoteric scholarship may be a fruitful seed-bed for pastoral-theology.

Thirdly, pastoral-theology is a discipline in its own right, with a method that differs from that of academic theology but which is just as reputable. Pastoral-theology is neither third-rate scholarship, nor the practical know-how that usually comes under the heading of pastoralia. This gives rise to a fourth point which was not very clearly brought out in the earlier book: it is that the modern Christian, deepening his faith by reading, or the pastor guiding him, must make his own theological adaptation according to circumstances. Pastoral-theology is that which makes such adaptation as easy as possible, but it cannot be written like a modern cook-book: take exactly these ingredients, in exactly these quantities, mix and bake for thirty-three minutes in an oven at 385 degrees and success is assured. Any experienced cook knows the fallacy of this approach. In the long run the vagary of the old fashioned recipe is more satisfactory: take apples (or pears), sugar (or honey), in “sufficient quantity,” add spices, herbs and flavourings “to taste,” bake in a moderate oven until nicely brown. That makes proper allowance for circumstances, experience and personal adaptation, and is analogous to good pastoral-theology.

Back in 1959 I published a book called *Christian Proficiency*¹ which has turned out to be quite a good example of this type of pastoral-theology. The advent of the new style in theological writing has at least clarified my own mind as to what I have been trying to do for the past twenty years. That book was based firmly and blatantly on Dr E. L. Mascall’s *Christ, the Christian and the Church*,² a work which, although studded with pastoral

1. S.P.C.K., 1959.

2. Longmans, Green, 1946.

insights, was not easily adaptable to the Christian life of prayer. This is no criticism of Mascall but rather an example of the proper correlation between scholarship and pastoral-theology.

But of recent years the comparative success of *Christian Proficiency*—it refuses to go completely and decently out-of-print—has become an embarrassment: if not out-of-print it is disastrously out-of-date. A lot of water has flowed under the bridge during the last twelve years, and under the spiritual-theological bridge it has become something of a torrent. I hope the present book will replace *Christian Proficiency*, for I am convinced that the only solid basis for the modern spirituality of which we so frantically search is solid and responsible modern theology. The present pastoral-theological experiment is based not on *Christ, the Christian and the Church*, but equally firmly and blatantly on John Macquarrie's *Principles of Christian Theology*.¹ The former appeared in 1946, the latter in 1966, and to see the differences between these two works is roughly to understand my own change of approach. In *Christian Proficiency*, my initial inquiry was: "this is the living tradition of Christian prayer, what is its doctrinal basis and how should we continue in it?" Dr Macquarrie suggests a different question: "I live in this world and I believe in the Creed, what do I do next?" Those who are familiar with the works of these two scholars will see the point. But it is of crucial importance to understand that they differ only in their philosophical framework and approach, while remaining in concord about the fundamentals of Christian doctrine. The difference in approach, moreover, is inspired and demanded by a total situation which has changed radically in the last twenty years. It is pertinent that *Principles of Christian Theology* was the subject of a most laudatory review-article by Dr. Mascall.² A further word of explanation is required as to my use of Dr Macquarrie's work. *Principles of Christian Theology* is a large book, a

1. S.C.M. Press, 1966 (revised 1977).

2. *Church Quarterly Review*, July, 1967.

Summa twice the length of *Christ, the Christian and the Church*, and it is divided into three parts. The first part expounds the new philosophical background against which we are to review Christian doctrine, and which should lead to new insights into prayer, and even to new methods if such are desired. Obviously the background must be understood before we can get anywhere, and its exposition and simplification present me with a difficult task. Dr Macquarrie is one of the new-style writers as well as being a contemporary theologian, so the simplest and best solution to the problem would be to refer the reader to the most relevant portions of the book.¹ I hope that many will adopt this course, but to leave the matter there would be to evade the duty of true pastoral-theology. Dr Macquarrie is both readable and exciting, but he is also a scholar in the best sense of that word, concerned with substantiating his thesis by scholarly methods. Pastoral-theology is concerned only with his relevant conclusion, of which it must try to make practical use. This may mean resorting to analogies, metaphors and descriptive symbols which, while not being erroneous, might not stand up to pedantic criticism. These possible dangers must be pointed out in context, but if such pastoral application is forbidden then a good deal of traditional spirituality—the nuptial analogy for example—must be ruled out of court: and there would be few legitimate sermons next Sunday.

The second part of *Principles of Christian Theology* is a contemporary interpretation of basic doctrine upon which a new spirituality is to be built. This section is our main concern. Part three, subtitled *Applied Theology*, will be used sparingly, which may sound curious. It could be suggested that either I am neglecting the most fruitful field for my purpose or that this section renders any further application superfluous, or even impertinent. To the first point I would reply that this third section bristles with

1. Chapters III, V, *see also* Dr Macquarrie's concise *Martin Heidegger* (Lutterworth Press, 1968).

practical insights to which I have nothing to add, and that other portions of it could well form the basis of another book. Were I to attempt a second study of Dr Macquarrie's work on this section—and the idea is inviting—it would replace not *Christian Proficiency* but my even earlier *Pastoral Theology: a Reorientation*.¹ This presents another reversal of values between the nineteen fifties and the nineteen seventies. The earlier book dealt with pastoral-theology behind parochial organization, with the shape of the parish as microcosm of the body of Christ. *Christian Proficiency* was something of a sequel dealing with the life and prayer of individuals within that organism. If there are two pastoral-theological books in Macquarrie's *Principles of Christian Theology* its approach demands that we start the other way round: only after having studied individual human existence is it possible to discuss the community of faith in which it is expressed.

As to the second point—that of impertinence—Dr Macquarrie himself draws a clear distinction between *applied* and *practical theology*² and he constantly declines to explore these fields in detail. For example: “Here again we touch on the border of a special discipline without seeking to invade it—the discipline of ascetical theology.”³ Coupled with an earlier remark that “applied theology will provide the theological principles from which these specialized studies will move into their particular fields,”⁴ I hope that this book will be regarded as the acceptance of an invitation rather than as an impertinent trespass. Under this policy part three of *Principles of Christian Theology* contains an invaluable but comparatively short chapter on prayer and worship,⁵ and this again might reasonably be construed as an invitation to elaborate.

1. S.P.C.K., 1956 (reissued as *The Heart of the Parish: A Theology of the Remnant*, Cowley Publications, 1989).

2. *Principles of Christian Theology* (rev. ed), I.6.v-vii.

3. *Principles of Christian Theology*, XX.86.i.

4. *Principles of Christian Theology*, I.6.v.

5. *Principles of Christian Theology*, XX.

But this is breaking the rules of pastoral-theological writing that I have set myself. It is being unnecessarily respectable because instead of regarding me as impertinent Dr Macquarrie has freely offered me his approval, help and encouragement. I have received help from others, being particularly grateful to the trustees of the John Bohlen Lectureship who honoured me with this appointment in 1970 and gave me the stimulus of a semester at the Philadelphia Divinity School. Professor John E. Skinner kindly read the draft manuscript, offering suggestions, encouragement and criticism, while conversations with other members of the faculty, and discussions with my classes, added further insights.

Having said all that it might be asked why I have resorted to such an old-fashioned and academic expedient as footnotes. In the first rough draft I tried to do without them and every page seemed to consist of the name of a scholar I am trying to interpret in pastoral-theological terms, together with the title of his book, all within a veritable forest of brackets. Since this is admittedly a speculation on the work of another, and since I hope at least one or two will take it seriously enough to refer to the original, old-fashioned footnotes of reference seem the most workable method. Perhaps it will underline the point that I am not interested in modernity for fashion's sake.

FOURTEEN

Silence

Contemporary spirituality is suspicious of “withdrawal” into acts of prayer, and the modern world is frightened of that silence which goes with it. This is understandable, even laudable, if it is an attack of religiosity, a rebellion against pushing God out on to the perimeter of life. But we have forestalled this interpretation by reversing the process-product relation of the old *regula*: acts of prayer are not so much framework and preparation for life as life itself in concentrated form. Periodic acts of prayer do not sanctify life since life is in God, and therefore sanctified already; prayer underlines and articulates the fact. withdrawal into silence is no escape but concentrated confrontation with reality. Nevertheless the process-product relation, whichever way round we put it, is reciprocal; the disciplined use of silence is one of the tradition means towards contemplation and its value cannot be gainsaid. But we speak of contemplation as, primarily, guide to life and decision in triune Being, not as an accomplishment in its own right.

If withdrawal into silence is focus or concentrate of experience, then it is a necessary and natural need, not an artificially imposed religious duty. Silence is the environment of creativity, the essential condition for letting-be, the birthplace of love. One does not usually compose poetry on Paddington station in the rush hour, although such experience may well provide the initial inspiration for a poem. Sleep and waking, incubation and birth, winter and summer, rest and action, habitual awareness of Being and acts of penitence and praise: this is the natural order of Things. Those who run from silence are the real escapist for they dare not confront reality.

It is common experience to ordinary Christians in retreat, or after a prolonged period of silent prayer, for things, beings, creation, to take on a new and more vivid appearance. The

cultivation of a deep interior silence issues in a new look towards everything, the presence and manifestation of Being in the beings is constant, but here is a positive response to that constancy. Under such conditions Julian contemplated her hazel-nut; to George Fox things had “another smell than before”; Saint Francis called wind and water brother and sister, not out of sentiment, but as a theological expression of contemplation; to John Scotus Eriugena the world became “a theophany.” In Buber’s terminology they all had moved into an *I-Thou* relationship. In Macquarrie’s, human being became united with other beings and glimpsed Being. In all cases it is prayer, emphatic and contemplative.

We have spoken of the cultivation of a deep interior silence, but that is misleading, for silence, like contemplation, ultimately precludes method and technique; one can only understand, experiment, and risk. Silence is positive, it is not the absence of noise, or in any case there is no such thing in nature as noiseless. It has to be deep and interior, and it may be achieved against a background of din, for the sense of hearing follows the same pattern as the other senses. The constant, pin-pointed gaze at the *mandala*—or tree or pylon or Daisy—the constant touch of the rosary bead, the enveloping smell of incense or soap; all these may integrate and concentrate. So may a constant background drone. If this interior quiet, which is active response to the disclosure of Being, cannot be induced by method, it can be experimented with, and it is of assistance if the process is psychologically and theologically understood.

The word *anapauo*—I rest—is fundamental to the biblical understanding of contemplation. We must now introduce another biblical word as the typological foundation of withdrawal into silence: the word is *eremos*—desert, lonely place, devastated country, or more commonly, wilderness. This word has a wide variety of meanings which for present purposes may be considered under three headings. First, it applies to a wilderness or desert as the scene of danger and desolation. It is the haunt of

the Gadarene Demoniac in Luke 8:29. It is a place of physical peril for Saint Paul¹ and for the multitude of the faithful.² It may also mean a city or country devastated by enemy action: “And Jesus knew their thoughts and said unto them, every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation” (*eremoutai*).³ Or it can be a place abandoned by its inhabitants, “Behold your house is left unto you desolate.”⁴ In Matthew 12:43, both keywords are found in conjunction: “When the unclean spirit is gone out of man, he walketh through dry places to seek rest (*anapausin*—resting place) and findeth none.”

It is not difficult to translate this into spiritual-theology. From danger of demons and wild beasts to spiritual danger is a short step, desolation is the opposite of consolation, and perhaps it is not too far-fetched to see dry places as the outcome of desolation, dryness or aridity of spirit.

Secondly, the word also carries the opposite connotation of safety and, again, rest. It is the refuge of the persecuted, as in 1 Kings 19, where Elijah flees from Jezebel into the wilderness, there to find rest and spiritual refreshment typified by the miraculous cake and cruse of water. But, looking back to our first heading, Elijah first gives up hope and pray for death; looking forward to our third heading, it is here that ultimately God appears, or if you wish Being is disclosed in the still small voice. To our Lord the wilderness is a special place of communion with the Father: “And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed.”⁵ It is also a direct instruction to the disciples: “And he said unto them, come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while.”⁶ Again *eremos* and *anapauo* in conjunction.

1. 2 Cor 11:26.

2. Heb 11:38.

3. Mt 12:25.

4. Mt 23:38; Lk 13:35; Acts 1:20.

5. Mk 1:35; cf. Mt 14:13; Lk 4:42; Jn 11:54.

6. Mk 6:31.

The third meaning is a synthesis of the preceding two, in that it emphasises the aspect of fruitfulness, creativity, and victory. In the stories of Moses and Elijah the result is prophetic insight, divine disclosure, and the retreat into a silent desert brings Jesus victory. How important, and how significant, are things, beings, physical manifestation, in these desert stories: the manna,¹ the water from the rock, the bitter water made sweet,² Elijah's mantle,³ and so on. Later the wilderness becomes the expected scene of Messiah's advent. John the Baptist comes out of the wilderness with the greatest prophetic message ever. *Eremos* takes on an eschatological significance for it is out of the desert that Christ will return in glory, finally to vanquish the powers of darkness. It is in the wilderness that the Church should remain when the terrible signs of the end appear and here the community of faith are to live, listening in silence for the disclosure of the silent God.

That is very sketchy and no doubt the biblical scholars could produce minutely documented tomes on the significance of these two words alone. Here it suffices to note the curiously constant progression: fear and danger, followed by rest and safety, followed by creativity, prophecy and victory. Not infrequently the order follows in the same story: Elijah wants to die in despair, then refreshment, then the disclosure of the still small voice. Out of Egypt into the wilderness is the beginning of Jewish religious consciousness. But the Exodus led to heartsearching, temptation, desolation and sin. Yet hope remained, and through the silent wilderness was the way to that good land, flowing with milk and honey. If we take out typology serious, Isaiah's great hymn to silence remains very pertinent indeed: "The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose. It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing: the glory of Lebanon shall be given

1. Ex 16:14ff.

2. Ex 15:25.

3. 2 Kings 2:8.

unto it, the excellency of Carmel and Sharon, they shall see the glory of the Lord, and the excellency of our God.”¹ I do not quote that because it sounds nice, or in case the reader has not heard it before, but because it takes on a new twist: out of silence shall come fragrance, even the trees shall manifest God’s presence.

The supreme exemplar is Christ himself. Gethsemane starts with tears and fear and bloody sweat, then the peace of God, then the victory: “thy will be done.” So with the temptation narrative: the long frightening vigil, the battle, the victory.

What does this mean? Neither silence nor contemplation are reducible to method but here is understand of what might be expected if the experiment is risked. Suppose a man, a modern man brings a period of silence into his weekly scheme of prayer, preferably three hours, as concentrate of the experience of Being in daily life. What is he expected to do? And what might he expect to happen? I cannot answer the first question, for there is no method: I can only say sink into Being, relax, recollect, look, feel. The answer to the second question is easier. The desert of silence will at first be frightening and dangerous, and considerable tensions will develop. Everything seems strange and artificial, and of special consequence to modern Christians there may be a sense of false piety, of religiosity. In spite of everything previously explained, here I am devoutly saying my prayers in apparent isolation from the world. It is all very uncomfortable. But the Bible has explained this as normal, as the proper start of the creative prayer of silence: it is Elijah giving up and petitioning for death; Christ sweating blood in Gethsemane. It is all part of the game.

There is also likely to be a temptation of a particularly virulent kind. The desert as traditional haunt of the demons is full of existential meaning. It was not by accident that our Lord suffered temptation after a silent a solitary sojourn in the

1. Is 35:1-2.

wilderness: it was why he was there, being “led up of the spirit.”¹ And it was this example which was followed in the experiments of the Desert Fathers. The flight to the desert was no negative rejection of the world but a positive search for God, but it was first a positive search for the devil. It was assumed, with curious optimism, that Satan had been driven out of the cities, to be persuaded into the desert for a final mopping-up operation. It was as purposeful as Christ’s self-initiated temptation and victory, and it is unlikely that Saint Anthony and Saint Jerome were surprised to find themselves assailed by carnal temptations. They knew what they were doing and courageously sallied forth to battle.

This discomfiture, awkwardness, and temptation can last a long time, and it is obviously a concentrate of a common state of life; a fight against alienation and disharmony which in the busy world easily gets shrugged off and left to fester. With perseverance it will pass into the second stage of rest, peace, contentment and contemplation. This is a concentrate of life in its better moods, and this stage can also last a long time.

The third stage is victory, inspiration, prophecy and discernment, but this, like God himself, cannot be sought. We can only respond to the divine omni-presence and omni-activity, omni-active-contemplation, or in less clumsy terms, to God’s continuous letting-be. This third stage is likely to be carried back into everyday living, it is the seed-bed of that discernment which is the third aspect of decision-making. Like sacramental grace, discernment does not come to us in semi-Pelagian doses, it gradually develops with our response to being let-be.

Nevertheless, after a prolonged period of silence the world looks different, things appear in sharper reality, and Being may be disclosed in them.

This kind of prayer is under attack from three quarters and some defence should be offered. First, the text-book, which

1. Mt 4:1; Lk 4:1.

frequently places it under the third of the falsely chronological Three Ways. In order to attempt such contemplation in silence one must be half-way, or perhaps nine-tenths of the way, to heaven. Here the object of contemplation is God in himself, not Being in the beings; a confusion with which we have dealt. And we have seen with crystal clarity from the Bible that this retreat into the desert, rather than being only possible after the defeat of sin, is in fact the battle itself. There is a strong case for the view that it is the sinner not the saint for whom such prayer is meant, yet in the text-books it is the sinner who is precluded from attempting it.

It is attacked by the modern radical, who sees this prayer as the epitome of self-centered pietism, as escape into religiosity. This criticism is overcome by our basic thesis that all prayer is relation and that acts of prayer are foci of life itself. We have also seen that false piety, like sin itself, is overcome as we persevere from the first stage into the second. In the modern world the escape from reality is not into the desert but into the crowd; not into silence but into the din.

Silent prayer demands long periods of time and serious Christians look upon it as too difficult for them. This stems from the text-book approach with its Three Ways confusion and its platonic-mystical slant. It is demonstrated as false by the remarkable record of the Retreat Movement. Year by year many thousands of people, schoolgirls, undergraduates and professional men amongst them, not only manage to survive a three days' retreat in silence, but discover a new medium of creativity. Their eyes and ears are opened to the disclosure of Being.

The principle of annual retreat, however, suffers certain disadvantages when it is placed within our new-map framework. Prayer is life in concentrate, and one must question the feasibility of a three-day concentrate of twelve months. What we are advocating is more like a weekly, or monthly "quiet day." The trouble with the conventional quiet day is that it is not very quiet, being generally prostituted by services and addresses. A quiet

day, moreover, is notoriously difficult to manage infrequently, and it is well-known that, to the beginner, a full three-day retreat is very much easier to cope with. Retreat, therefore, might well play in proficient Christian living. But it would have to be fairly frequent. That is by the way; we are concerned with principles not rules. We are still building upon our premise: I live in this world and I believe in the creed; what do I do next? From this existential-ontological basis, from living experiences in the world, from Christian discipleship, from the fundamental religious experience of awareness of Being in the beings; from all this the need for silence has arisen. "Be still, and know that I am God"¹ is no pious exhortation but a pastoral-theological fact.

1. Ps 46:10.

END OF EXCERPT

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This is a chapter-length excerpt of a book not yet reissued in print by Akenside Press. Although the text has been given an initial proofreading, there may yet be spellings errors and other typos, because the book has not been thoroughly proofread for final print production.

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