

# PART 1. SETTING THE SCENE

## Introduction

The right relation between prayer and conduct is not that conduct is supremely important and prayer may help it, but that prayer is supremely important and conduct tests it.

**William Temple**

What is mysticism? And what exactly is Quietism, rightly regarded by most as a sort of mysticism *manqué*? Of course, there are many definitions of mysticism, and only one for Quietism, which hinges upon the purely *passive* aspect of spirituality to which no right-minded religion could give any kind of credence. Here, for instance, is the definition of Quietism in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*: 'Quietism: passive attitude towards life, with devotional contemplation and abandonment of the will, as form of religious mysticism'. In this introduction, then, I shall concentrate on the crucial difference between authentic mysticism and Quietism, a difference that pivots on the exercise of the will and the practical and moral dimension to life in general that this implies.

It has to be said at the outset that interpretations of both mysticism and Quietism are grounded in the notion of *harmony*, for which music gives us perhaps our closest analogies. The Swiss philosopher and critic Amiel, for instance, says: 'Music . . . set me dreaming of another world, of infinite passion and supreme happiness. . . . If music thus carries us to heaven, it is because music is harmony, harmony is perfection, perfection is our dream, and our dream is heaven'. Additionally, the following passage written in 1934 by Admiral Byrd following a day manning a weather station in the Antarctic, also likens the harmony I associate with the mystical experience to music, in this case the music of the spheres:

I paused to listen to the silence. . . . The day was dying, the night being born – but with great peace. Here were imponderable processes and forces of the cosmos, harmonious and soundless. Harmony, that was it! That was what came out of the silence – a gentle rhythm, the strain of a perfect chord, the music of the spheres,

perhaps. . . . It was enough to catch that rhythm, momentarily to be myself a part of it. In that instant I could feel no doubt of man's oneness with the universe. The conviction came that that rhythm was too orderly, too harmonious, too perfect to be a product of blind chance – that, therefore, there must be purpose in the whole and that man was part of that whole and not an accidental off-shoot. It was a feeling that transcended reason; that went to the heart of man's despair and found it groundless. The universe was a cosmos, not a chaos; man was as rightfully a part of that cosmos as were the night and day.<sup>1</sup>

The harmony of the music of the spheres also finds expression in a poem titled *Heavenly Life* by Fray Luis de León (1527/8-91), a mystical poet of Spain's Golden Age. Crucially, however, it is in this poem that we begin to see the difference between straightforward accounts of the experience of mystical harmony such as the one from Admiral Byrd, and Luis de León's account in which the role of the will as a force for moral good is also clearly discernible. In fact, the difference in these interpretations of mystical harmony are as great as the difference between passivity and activity, between a harmony that is synonymous with quietistic inertia, and a harmony that has an active, morally purposeful dimension. Here is Fray Luis' poem:

Region of life and light!  
 Land of the good whose earthly toils are o'er!  
 Nor frost nor heat may blight  
 Thy vernal beauty, fertile shore,  
 Yielding thy blessed fruits for evermore!

There without crook or sling,  
 Walks the Good Shepherd; the blossoms white and red  
 Round his meek temples cling;  
 And, to sweet pastures led,  
 His own loved flock beneath his eye is fed.

He guides, and near him they  
 Follow delighted; for he makes them go  
 Where dwells eternal May,  
 And heavenly roses blow,  
 Deathless, and gathered but again to grow.

He leads them to the height  
 Named of the infinite and long-sought Good,  
 And fountains of delight;  
 And where his feet have stood,  
 Springs up, along the way, their tender food.

And when, in the mid skies,  
 The climbing sun has reached his highest bound,  
 Reposing as he lies,  
 With all his flock around,  
 He witches the still air with lofty sound.  
 From his sweet lute flow forth  
 Immortal harmonies, of power to still  
 All passions born of earth,  
 And draw the ardent will  
 Its destiny of goodness to fulfil.<sup>2</sup>

This poem, translated here by the American poet William Cullen Bryant, starts with a description of the peace and harmony of the heavenly goal to which Christ ('the Good Shepherd') is the guide: 'Region of light and life/ Land of the good whose earthly toils are o'er'. The beauty of the earth's spring is of course a metaphor for the peace and ideal beauty of heaven: 'Thy vernal beauty, fertile shore/ Yielding thy blessed fruits for evermore!' The poem then continues its description of our ascent to heaven until we reach the still, silent climax of the peace and passivity of the Void, or Godhead, of which Christ is the personal aspect: 'Reposing as he lies/ With all his flock around'. In contradistinction to Quietism, however, it is vital to note here that not only do we 'repose' in the Godhead, but through Christ we also share in its power and activity. And it this harmony, embodied in Christ, that stills our passions and draws our will – contrary to the quietist position – into cooperation with the Godhead, 'its destiny of goodness to fulfill'.

In such a scheme as this, which speaks of the union of God and creature, there can be no place for any quietistic interpretation in the spiritual life, for such a union is dependent on the loving cooperation of the creature itself, as Meister Eckhart implies in these words: 'Now, I might ask, how stands it with the soul that is lost in God? Does the soul find herself or not? . . . Although it sinks in the eternity of the divine essence, yet it can never reach the ground. Therefore God has left a little point wherein the soul turns back upon itself and finds itself and knows itself to be a creature'.<sup>3</sup>

In this way mysticism attains its highest expression as a union of creator *and* creature, lover *and* beloved, and in that harmony of activity and passivity, power and peace I call 'dynamic passivity', and which characterises all genuine mystical experience, a truism also acknowledged by Aldous Huxley: 'the life in which ethical expenditure is balanced by spiritual income must be a life in which action alternates with repose, speech with alertly passive silence'.<sup>4</sup>

A Christian would say that the process of harmonization described above comes to fruition in Jesus, the perfect paradigm of the Godhead in both active and passive modes, and as such the antithesis of that sterile and one-

sided passivity that characterises the quietist. This notion of Jesus as the apotheosis of dynamic passivity is endorsed by William Vanstone in his *Stature of Waiting*. Here Jesus mirrors the love of God in both his active aspect, in his ‘free and unfettered activity’, and passively, ‘in exposure and helplessness’:

There is in the God who is disclosed in Jesus first the glory of signs and mighty works – the glory of free and unfettered activity and achievement; but when Jesus destines himself, by his own will and initiative, to wait at the end in exposure and helplessness, there is disclosed, as the ultimate dimension of the divine glory, that same glory which we dimly perceive in our own experience when, because we love, we destine ourselves to wait and to be exposed and to receive.<sup>5</sup>

It is Christ the mystic, then, who embodies that perfect harmony of activity and passivity I call ‘dynamic passivity’, and which I believe to be the essence of all authentic mysticism, a view shared by R.C. Moberly:

It is Christ who is the true mystic . . . it is he . . . who has realized all that mysticism and mystics have aimed at. And in him that perfect realization evidently means a harmony, a sanity, a fitly proportioned completeness. It is an inward light which makes itself manifest as character; a direct communion of love which is also, to the fullest extent, wholly rational at once and wholly practical . . . it is as truly contemplation as activity, and activity as contemplation. In being the ideal of mysticism, it is also the ideal of general, and of practical, and of *all*, Christian experience.<sup>6</sup>

Christianity is not the only religion, of course, to emphasise the practical and moral dimension in the mystical experience so conspicuously lacking in the theology of Quietism. We might also consider the thought of the Bengali mystic Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), for he too talks of the Godhead as a harmony of power and passivity, delighting not only in a passive and formless Void, but also in a creative dynamism. If the formless Void were perfect in itself, reasons Tagore, it would not need actively to express itself in the universe. However, since there *is* form – matter and particularity – then the formlessness of the Void does indeed also have a dynamic function, for it has imparted expression to the created world as we perceive it. Additionally, argues Tagore, this form tends ultimately towards *personality*, so that the Godhead may be said to create the world of forms for its own fulfilment, a fulfilment that depends on an unconditional mutual love between creator and created, which is the Highest Good. And such a fulfilment is possible, of course, only if the lover and beloved are separate entities, a truism Tagore explains in these joyous terms:

Thus it is that thy joy in me is so full. Thus it is that thou hast come down to me. O thou lord of all heavens, where would be thy love if I were not? . . . And for this, thou who art the King of kings has decked thyself in beauty to captivate my heart. And for this thy love loses itself in the love of thy lover, and there art thou seen in the perfect union of two.<sup>7</sup>

Let us now restate the difference between genuine mysticism and Quietism, its spurious counterpart. To do this I shall quote from *The Tragic Sense of Life* by the Spanish existentialist Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936). In the lines that follow Unamuno outlines what he calls ‘the terrible and tragic formula of the inner, spiritual life’. Quite unlike the quietists Unamuno here insists on the supreme importance of love and suffering in the spiritual life – a natural corollary of Juan de los Ángeles’ injunction ‘Be not’ – while at the same time deriding those whose sole aim is a passive and sterile ‘happiness’:

The happy who resign themselves to their apparent happiness, to a transitory happiness, seem to be as men without substance . . . Such men are usually incapable of loving or of being loved, and they go through life without really knowing either pain or bliss . . . The moment love becomes happy and satisfied, it no longer desires and it is no longer love . . . The satisfied, the happy, do not love; they fall asleep in habit . . . To fall into habit is to begin to cease to be . . . we ought to ask for the gift of love and not of happiness, and to be preserved from dozing away into habit, lest we should fall into a fast sleep, a sleep without waking, and so lose our consciousness beyond power of recovery . . . he who approaches the infinite of love approaches the zero of happiness . . . Be not, and thou shalt be mightier than aught that is, said Brother Juan de los Ángeles.<sup>8</sup>

Thus true peace and harmony transcend mere happiness, for as Unamuno puts it ‘man is the more man – that is, the more divine – the greater his capacity for suffering’. Ultimately, the warrant for this suffering is derived from the ‘Be not’ of Juan de los Ángeles, and is grounded in ‘the dynamic passivity of the Void’, or ‘Godhead’, which as Meister Eckhart famously explained lies beyond any notion of a personal ‘God’: ‘The Godhead gave up all things to God. The Godhead is poor, naked and empty as though it were not; it has not, wills not, wants not, works not, gets not. It is God who has the treasure and the bride in him, the Godhead is as void as though it were not’.<sup>9</sup> And in poetic terms Arthur Symonds asks, ‘Where shall this self at last find happiness?’ To which he replies:

O Soul, only in nothingness . . .  
To be is homage unto being; cease  
To be, and be at peace,

If it be peace for self to have forgot  
Even that it is not...

That such peace and harmony arise from ‘nothingness’, or ‘emptiness’, is vouched for by all mystics, including Miguel de Molinos, an emptiness that is also encouraged, for instance, by the ‘Suringama Sutra’ of Buddhism:

If you wish to tranquillise your mind and restore its original purity, you must proceed as you would do if you were purifying a jar of muddy water. You first let it stand, until the sediment settles at the bottom, when the water will become clear, which corresponds with the state of the mind before it is troubled by defiling passions. Then you carefully strain off the pure water . . . When the mind becomes tranquillised and concentrated into perfect unity, then all things will be seen, not in their separateness, but in their unity, wherein there is no place for the passions to enter, and which is in full conformity with the mysterious and indescribable purity of Nirvana.<sup>10</sup>

It is this ‘purity’, or ‘emptiness’, says Miguel de Molinos, to which we must aspire and for which he teaches us to pray in his *Spiritual Guide*, for as Aldous Huxley puts it: ‘It is the inactivity of self-will and ego-centred cleverness that makes possible the activity within the emptied and purified soul’.<sup>11</sup>

To sum up, the *Spiritual Guide* is above all a manual of Christian mystical prayer, and as I shall go on to show – despite appearances to the contrary – emphatically rejects that quietistic inertia for which it has for so long been traduced. The key word to describe the spirituality of the *Guide* I have just set down is perhaps ‘renunciation’, a quality recognized as absolutely intrinsic to the Christian life, and one that is transparently antiquietistic. ‘The formula for renunciation’, argues Teilhard de Chardin, ‘must satisfy two conditions. . . . It must enable us to go beyond everything there is in the world . . . and yet at the same time compel us to press forward the development of this same world’. Consequently, says Teilhard, ‘in the course of this hard labour, and in pursuit of an ever widening appeal’. . . we achieve ‘a renunciation and victory over a narrow and lazy egoism’.<sup>12</sup> It is this victory over inertia and ‘a narrow and lazy egoism’ that runs counter to all notions of Quietism, and which is urged upon us by the *Spiritual Guide* of Miguel de Molinos: ‘The benefit of true prayer doesn’t consist in enjoyment of the light or in acquiring knowledge of spiritual matters, for this you can get through discursive thinking without true virtue and perfection. It really consists in suffering patiently and continuing in faith and silence, turning to God with serenity and tranquillity. While you continue like this you have the right attitude and all the preparation you need, and you will improve enormously’.