

## BE STILL AND KNOW

'Be still, and know that I am God' (Ps. 46: 10). That is not our normal way of knowing. Though the methods of science demand an almost passive objectivity in the presence of that which we seek to know, it requires more of that restless quest and active experimentation that characterizes our urban-technological civilization. The goal of technology appears to be the mastery of the world, which calls for vigilance and struggle rather than quietness and passivity. The restlessness that characterizes our culture is surely more than the *consequence* of our loss of assurance. It seems to be, among other things, the *pre-condition* for technological advance and eventual domination of the environment. Neither science nor technology could have come out of sheer passivity.

Does the counsel of the Psalmist then have any validity for our time? Is not the very attempt to have a 'Quiet Day' a regress into passivity and a step backward in the progress of man? My theological colleagues on the Continent seem to have an aversion for the word 'Retreat' or 'Meditation', apparently because these engender passivity in a world where the demand on man is to be active and unresting.

This is a fear which goes much further back in our history than the Industrial Revolution. The fourteenth century controversy between Gregory Palamas, the Greek

Orthodox Hesychast and the Western Calabrian monk Barlaam over the effectiveness of 'hesychasm' or the method of quietness, already points to a long-existing cleavage in the ways of knowing God and of making statements about Him.

We are now living at a time and in a university world where there appears to be an insistence on the part of some Christians that there can be no fundamental difference between knowing God and knowing other persons and things. Statements about God are analysable on the same principles as statements of fact or descriptions of persons. This discursive approach to the knowledge of God has both its value and its peril. The value lies in the clearing away of some of the theological junk that has accumulated around the concept 'God' in recent centuries. The peril is that by including God among the objects of knowledge, we lose sight of that only true God who is without peer and who cannot be compared with anyone in the created order. This was the vision that turned Pascal away from 'the God of the Philosophers and Scholars' to the 'God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob'. And it is this latter God that the Psalmist exhorts his own soul to know in stillness. Any other God, who can be the object of our knowledge, must be an idol.

How then shall I dare to say something discursive about God? Especially reminded I am of the warning of St. Gregory Nazianzen in the 4th century:

Not to everyone, my friends, does it belong to philosophize about God—not to everyone; the subject is not so cheap and low; and, I will add, not before every

audience, nor at all times, nor on all points; but on certain occasions, and before certain persons, and within certain limits.

Not to all men, because it is permitted only to those who have been examined, and are past masters in meditation, and who have been previously cleansed in soul and body, or at the very least, are *being* cleansed. For the unclean to touch the clean is, we may safely say, not safe, just as it is unsafe to fix weak eyes upon the sun's rays.

And what is the permitted occasion? It is when we are free from all external defilement or disturbance, and when the ruling element in us is unmixed with vexatious and delusive imaginations. . . . For it is necessary to be in a genuine state of rest even to know God, and to discern Orthodox theology only when we can avail ourselves of the proper occasion.

And who are the permitted persons? They to whom the subject is of real concern, and not they who make it a matter of pleasant gossip, like any other topic, after the races, or the theatre, or a concert, or a dinner, or still lower employments. . .

(*Oratio* XXVII, PG. 36: 13C-16A).

Well, the fact that this passage says nothing about the expositor, gives me reason to believe that for St. Gregory at least, when one speaks of God, the speaker is on the same level with his listeners, requiring the same qualifications as are called for in them. I am no 'past master in meditation'. I certainly have not been cleansed in soul and body, except in so far as we have all been washed

with the water of regeneration in Baptism. I dare not even say that I am *being* cleansed, for judging by my own faulty standards, I can detect far more uncleanness in me today than I could ten years ago. It is unsafe for me then to look upon the pure glory of God in the present unclean state of my being.

Am I free from 'vexatious and delusory imaginations'? That is a state of mind beyond the ordinary competence of a church administrator. Even apart from that, such freedom can only be the outcome of a deep faith and a growth in spirit which I can at present only yearn for.

Then what is our justification for this exercise? Just this, that we are all concerned about God; for the simple and sinful reason that we have discovered that to be properly concerned about oneself requires being properly concerned about God. Even this long prologue is justified only by the fact that we need reminders of *our* creatureliness and *His* being beyond being and determination, when we so facilely speak of Him as if He were a topic among topics.

'Be at rest, and know that I am God.' The Hebrew word used here for 'be still' is *harpu* which means literally, let go, relax, abandon. The root-word *raphah* means 'to sink'. And this is precisely the sense in which one has to be still in order to know God.

It means first to cease striving, and secondly to suspend one's discursive or critical faculties, and thirdly to be free from anxiety.

To live, especially in our time, is to swim, and swim against the current. Theological students need no out-

side evidence for that. To cease to swim would mean automatically to sink. One cannot finish one's course without constant and ceaseless striving. To cease striving means death.

To be a student of theology and to suspend one's discursive or critical faculties, is the sort of thing one can do for a while when one is having a fling—even then one requires the aid of considerable quantities of alcohol to achieve that state of freedom from the faculty of critical judgment. To be an intelligent man means today to be in full possession of one's faculty of judgment. One holds oneself with a sharp and polished mind, as if it were a precision instrument in order to perceive reality, to separate sense from nonsense, and to clarify what really is, by attacking what is false. To suspend that faculty is to degenerate, to regress in the movement of biological evolution, to be less than a man. And yet this is what is required in order to know God.

To be free from anxiety—that is even harder. The conscious anxieties of a young person are limited and traceable. But there are many more inner uncertainties in our consciousness which are but vaguely perceived even by ourselves. To be liberated from them is part of what the Bible calls 'being still' or relaxing. We shall discuss this point at greater length when we come to discuss Faith.

Can we then know God at all? I would say it is very difficult. So few of those of us who are theologically trained can be said to know God, precisely because of our tendency to look upon Him as a subject for discursive study, and our inability to become like little children, and what is harder, still and quiet ones.

And yet speak about God we must. At least we must say in what ways we should not speak of God. We can no longer speak about Him as 'up there' or 'out there'. I do not know very much about the Diocese of Southwark, but I was under the impression that in most parts of the world intelligent and educated people had given up thinking about God in those terms some centuries ago. But can we now talk about God as being 'down here' or as 'the beyond in our midst'? Those of us who still use the language of physical elevation to refer to the exaltedness of God seldom mean 'up there' in any geographical sense. I trust that the Bishop of Woolwich's 'down here' is not intended in a geographical or anatomical sense either.

There are several ways of speaking about God, but none of them is really to be understood in the ordinary sense of the words. When Tillich says 'God does not exist, He simply is', he is saying something very profound, for which our languages are most inadequate. To exist is to occupy a point in time and space, and in that sense God does not exist. That is why the information that Colonel Yuri Gagarin brought back to us that he did not encounter God in space did not particularly shock or amuse us. But what do we really mean when we say that 'God is'? I do not think I am capable of conceptionally interpreting that brief statement. I do not certainly mean that 'there is an object of ultimate concern' or that there exists a Being called God. For Being itself is a category of determined existence, and God's Being is certainly not determined existence.

Martin Buber, to whom Tillich owes a great deal, in an essay on Hermann Cohen, makes the point that the

philosopher's great effort 'to sustain the object of his love as an object of his philosophic thought' has always failed and is bound to fail. It matters little how deeply the philosopher knows God and loves Him. God and the Idea of God can never be related to each other as a thing and the idea of that thing. His being is, as Berdyaev puts it, *meontic*\* Being, Being which is beyond being, Being which is non-being in a *mé-ontic* sense, Being which can never be reduced to 'the Beyond in our Midst'.

He is. He has known us and caused us to know Him. Is He a Person? O, I know not, for to say that God is Person is to put Him in a class. I know that He has acted in a personal way. He becomes a person to His other, whom He has made out of nothing. When the creation began to exist, in the beginning when time and space came to be, He chose to have this other *vis-a-vis* Him, and therefore we can think of Him as a Person. When man stood up on his two legs and began to address God in his own primitive, crude, groping but intensely personal way, then God was there to respond as a Person. But it was He who created the Human Person in His own image, and gave Him the possibility to respond to Him, to seek after Him, and perchance to find Him.

But man occupies space and time, unlike God. God occupies time-space only in so far as He took upon Himself the form and limitations of man. The Creation, of which time and space seem to be part, itself appears to

\* *meontic* was distinguished from *oukontic*. The latter word means simply 'not existing', whereas the former means 'not yet come into determined existence', or potential Being.

exist in that time and space, at least from our human time-space perspective.

But why this created other of God? Why the Creation? Why Man? 'Absurd,' answer Camus and Kafka. 'Why are there *Seiende* (beings) rather than nothing? That is the question', is the promising beginning of Heidegger's epoch-making Freiburg lecture of 1935, but no answer has yet been proffered by the Sage of the Black Forest in these four decades. But he admitted even then that this was the broadest and deepest of questions. And my purport was to answer that question in a couple of paragraphs. But now when I approach it, I am terrified. Am I not being intellectually naïve and philosophically innocent when I seek so facily to answer so profound a question?

I have one consolation however, and it lies in these words of Heidegger himself: 'Anyone for whom the Bible is divine revelation and truth has the answer to the question, "Why are there *Seiende* (beings) rather than nothing?" even before it is asked. Everything that is, except God Himself, has been created by Him. God Himself, the increate Creator, is.'

The creation is because He who is has chosen that it should be. He could have chosen otherwise. He can still will that that which is by His will, becomes nothing. And that is true of Man too.

'Man as man is an audacity of life', says the great Sage of Jerusalem, Martin Buber, 'undetermined and unfixed; he therefore requires confirmation'. That is a most profound statement about Man's tentative status. Man



partakes in the indeterminate being of God. But there is a basic difference between the two indeterminacies. God is undetermined in so far as He wills to be so, and His own being, if we may use that ambiguous term in an indeterminate sense, has its roots and sources in itself. Therefore it is not as wavering and anxious as our indeterminate being is; our being has an emptiness at bottom; we have to fill this in some way in order to feel our existence. The whole of human existence is the struggle to find the foundation on which we can establish that existence. We find many such foundations in the process of our experimentation. Our own bodies, the approval of others, our class or nationality, our wisdom and strength, our position in society, the groups to which we belong, these are, all in some way, places where man searches for anchor or confirmation.

But all these have a fickleness that makes us anxious. Even if some of these were to give us support so long as we live, at the moment of death these begin to fall apart, and we plunge into an abyss where these cannot provide us with a foothold. Also while we live in this world with these elements in creation as our footholds, there is a growing uncertainty about their strength which makes us vaguely anxious. And life itself puzzles us. What is it for? For enjoyment? The more sensitive souls feel that they cannot be satisfied with that answer. For, the enticing pleasures themselves crumble in the grasp, they fall to pieces and fail to satisfy on attainment. Guilt and anxiety continue to plague our souls, and we are not sure as to how to deal with these indefinables except perhaps to camouflage them, to stifle them, to give them literary expression or to deal with them in some such finally unsatisfying way.

Spurred on by uncertainty and anxiety we begin to grasp the environment with the greatest firmness, and develop our methods of defense and production, our science and technology, our politics and our economics. Yet the more we advance in our control of the environment, something within us seems to get more and more beyond control, and we are still unsettled, insecure, and vaguely anxious.

We sought for confirmation in Creation, and while it has given us some sense of meaning and fulfilment, yet the permanent foothold seems to avoid the groping and aching feet of man.

Most of us even become afraid of asking that ultimate question—Where is the root of all being? Where is the bottom of the abyss? This ground on which I now stand, and which makes me anxious, is it the primal *Ur-grund* for which my soul craves, or merely an *Ab-grund*, the slithery slope of an abyss, or again an *Un-grund*, a non-ground, to use the terminology of Heidegger. Many of us are like the Gadarene swine of the Lucan Gospel, who, with a legion of hard-driving demons in possession of their bodies, were rushing head-long over a steep precipice to their death in the deep sea; when one of the pigs sought to catch his breath long enough to ask his neighbour: 'Do you have any idea where we are all going?' he received the answer: 'Don't ask such silly questions; the important thing for a well-behaved swine is to keep with the herd and to keep moving.'

'Be still, and know that I am God'. No, 'be active and move with the herd'.

But is it a simple choice between the two? Can the true ground for standing be obtained only by denying the reality, the meaning and the purpose of this world?

Why then this creation? Simply to conceal reality from us? Are we not left here to till it and make something of it? Are not all things to be put under the feet of Man in Christ? Are not science and technology and the critical mind also the gifts of God?

Let us remain in quietness and seek for clarification—not in restless anxiety, but in quiet concern.

Let us pray.