

Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

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Creative Silence

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The following piece was originally published in *The Baptist Student*, the student newspaper of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky (vol. 48, no. 5, February 1969) and is reprinted with permission. Merton's understanding of "creative silence" and his appreciation of the place of silence not only in Christianity but also in Hinduism and Buddhism (as noted toward the end of this article) make the piece especially appropriate for inclusion in our Bulletin.

Imagine a man or a group of people who, alone or together in a quiet place where no radio, no background music can be heard, simply sit for an hour and a half in silence. They do not speak. They do not pray aloud. They do not have books or papers in their hands. They are not reading or writing. They are not busy with anything. They simply enter into themselves, not in order to think in an analytical way, not in order to examine, organize, plan, but simply in order to be. They want to synthesize, to integrate themselves, to rediscover themselves in a unity of thought, will, understanding, and love that go beyond words, beyond analysis, even beyond conscious thought. They want to pray not with their lips but with their silent hearts and, beyond that, with the very ground of their being.

What would prompt modern people to do such a thing? Are they moved only by a sense of human need for silence, for reflection, for inner seeking? Do they merely want to get away from the noise and tension of modern life, at least for a little while, in order to relax their minds and wills, and seek a blessed healing sense of inner unity, reconciliation, integration?

These are certainly good enough motives. But for a Christian there are even deeper motives than this. A Christian can realize himself called by God to periods of silence, reflection, meditation, and "listening." We are perhaps too talkative, too activist, in our conception of the Christian life. Our service of God and of the church does not consist only in talking and doing. It can also consist in periods of silence, listening, waiting. Perhaps it is very important in our era of violence and unrest, to rediscover meditation, quiet inner unitive prayer and creative Christian silence.

Silence has many dimensions. It can be a regression and an escape, a loss of self, or it can be presence, awareness, unification, self-discovery. Negative silence blurs and confuses our identity and we lapse into daydreams or diffuse anxieties. Positive silence pulls us together and makes us realize who we are, who we might be, and the distance between these two. Hence, positive silence implies a disciplined choice, and what Paul Tillich called the "courage to be." In the long run, the discipline of creative silence demands a certain kind of faith. For when we come face to face with ourselves in the lonely ground of our own being, we confront many questions about the value of our existence, the reality of our commitments, the authenticity of our everyday lives.

When we are constantly in movement, always busy meeting the demands of our social role, passively carried along on the stream of talk in which people mill around from morning to night, we are perhaps able to escape from our deeper self and from the questions it poses. We can be more or less content with the external identity, the social self, which is produced by our interaction with others in the wheeling and dealing of everyday life. But no matter how honest and open we may be in our relations with others, this social self does imply a necessary element of artifice. It is always to some extent a mask. It has to be.

Even the American taste for frankness, homely simplicity, affability, plainness, and humor is often a front. Some people are naturally that way. Others educate themselves to play this part in order to be accepted by society. Nor is it entirely pretense: it appeals to us. But do we ever give ourselves a chance to realize that this talkative, smiling, perhaps rough-and-ready personage that we seem to be, is not necessarily our real self? Do we ever give ourselves a chance to recognize something deeper? Can we face the fact that we are perhaps not interested in all this talk and business? When we are quiet, not just for a few minutes, but for an

hour or several hours, we may become uneasily aware of the presence within us of a disturbing stranger, the self that is both "I" and someone else. The self that is not entirely welcome in his own house because he is so different from the everyday character that we have constructed out of our dealings with others and our infidelities to ourselves. There is a silent self within us whose presence is disturbing precisely because it is so silent: it can't be spoken. It has to remain silent. To articulate it, to verbalize it, is to tamper with it and in some ways to destroy it.

Now let us frankly face the fact that our culture is one which is geared in many ways to help us evade any need to face this inner, silent self. We live in a state of constant semi-attention to the sound of voices, music, traffic, or the generalized noise of what goes on all the time around us. This keeps us immersed in a flood of racket and words, a diffuse medium in which our consciousness is half-diluted: we are not quite "thinking," not entirely responding, but we are more or less "there." We are not fully present and not entirely absent; not fully withdrawn yet not completely available. It cannot be said that we are really participating in anything, and we may, in fact, be half conscious of our alienation and resentment. Yet, we derive a certain comfort from the vague sense that we are "part" of something, although we are not quite able to define what that something is—and probably wouldn't want to define it even if we could. We just float along in the general noise. Resigned and indifferent, we share semiconsciously in the mindless mind of Muzak and radio commercial which pass for "reality."

Of course, this is not enough to keep us completely forgetful of the other unwelcome self that remains so largely unconscious. The disquieting presence of our deep self keeps forcing its way almost to the surface of awareness. To exorcise this presence we need a more definite stimulation, a distraction, a drink, a drug, a gimmick, a game, a routine of acting out our sense of alienation and trouble. Then it goes away for the time being and we forget who we are.

All of this can be described as "noise," as commotion and jamming which drown out the deep, secret, and insistent demand of the inner self.

With this inner self we have to come to terms in silence. That is the reason for choosing silence. In silence we face and admit that gap between the depths of our being, which we consistently ignore, and the surface which is so often untrue to our own reality. We recognize the need to be at home with ourselves in order that we may go out to meet others, not just with the mask of affability, but with real commitment and authentic love.

If we are afraid of being alone, afraid of silence, it is perhaps because of our secret despair of inner reconciliation. If there is no hope of being at peace with ourselves in our own personal loneliness and silence, we will never be able to face ourselves at all: we will keep running and never stop. And this flight from the self is, as the Swiss philosopher Max Picard pointed out, a "flight from God." After all, it is in the depths of the conscience that God speaks, and if we refuse to open up inside and look into these depths, we also refuse to confront the invisible God who is present within us. This refusal is a partial admission that we do not want God to be God any more than we want ourselves to be our true selves.

Just as we have a superficial, external mask which we put together with words and actions that do not fully represent all that is in us, so even believers deal with a God who is made up of words, feelings, reassuring slogans, and this is less the God of faith than the product of religious and social routines. Such a "god" can come to substitute for the truth of the invisible God of faith, and though this comforting image may seem real to us, his is really a kind of idol. His chief function is to protect us against a deep encounter with our true inner self and with the true God.

Silence is therefore important even in the life of faith and in our deepest encounter with God. We cannot always be talking, praying in words, cajoling, reasoning, verbalizing, or keeping up a kind of devout background music. Much of our well-meant interior religious dialogue is, in fact, a smoke screen and an evasion. Much of it is simply self-reassurance, and in the end it is little better than a form of self-justification. Instead of really meeting God in the nakedness of faith in which our inmost being is laid bare before him, we act out an inner ritual that has no function but to allay anxiety.

The purest faith has to be tested by silence in which we listen for the unexpected, in which we are open to what we do not yet know, and in which we slowly and gradually prepare for the day when we will reach out to a new level of being with God. True hope is tested by silence in which we have to wait on the Lord in the

obedience of unquestioning faith. Isaiah recorded the word of Yahweh to his rebellious people who were always abandoning him in order to enter into worthless political and military alliances. "Your safety lies in ceasing to make leagues, your strength is in quiet faith" (Isa. 30:15). Or as another translation has it, "Your salvation lies in conversion and tranquillity, your strength in complete trust." Older texts say, "In silence and hope shall your strength be." The idea is that faith demands the silencing of questionable deals and strategies. Faith demands the integrity of inner trust which produces wholeness, unity, peace, genuine security. Here we see the creative power and fruitfulness of silence. Not only does silence give us a chance to understand ourselves better, to get a truer and more balanced perspective of our own lives in relations to the lives of others: silence makes us whole if we let it. Silence helps draw together the scattered and dissipated energies of a fragmented existence. It helps us to concentrate on a purpose that really corresponds not only to the deepest needs of our own being but also to God's intentions for us.

This is a really important point. When we live superficially, when we are always outside ourselves, never quite "with" ourselves, always divided and pulled in many directions by conflicting plans and projects, we find ourselves doing many things that we do not really want to do, saying things we do not really mean, needing things we do not really need, exhausting ourselves for what we secretly realize to be worthless and with out meaning in our lives: "Why spend your money on what is not food and your earnings on what never satisfies?" (Isa. 55:2)

The psychologist Erich Fromm has pointed out that this inner contradiction derived from the alienation and frustration in American life is one of the roots of violence in our society. We are at odds with ourselves, and we seek release by fantasies and dramas of violence. These are simply an amplification of the inner noise and resentment which fill us when we continually ignore the demands of our inmost real self and of God within us.

In many religions, the practice of silent meditation has always been given great importance. This is particularly true of Hinduism and Buddhism, where the art of meditation and the cultivation of inner silence are right at the heart of everything. But it is also true in Christianity. Catholic monasticism has always stressed the importance of silent meditation on the word of God. The Quakers have always attached great importance to a communal listening to the inner moving of the Spirit. Even Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the apostle of a radical and "secular" Christianity, remarked on the importance of silence. In his prison letters he wrote of his repugnance for the superficial gossip of the prisoners. And yet, they did not seem preoccupied about the deeper form of expression that would take place if they unburdened themselves to a trusted friend and spoke of what was most intimate in themselves.

What is much more serious is Bonhoeffer's observation that the church itself engaged in too much empty talk. The church, in fighting to preserve and assert its position, seemed to him to make self-preservation an end in itself. The church talked more and more about itself and more and more for itself, less and less for the kingdom. He said the church had "thereby lost its chance to speak a word of reconciliation to mankind and the world at large." Bonhoeffer foresaw that this would lead the church—all the churches—into a realm of silence, confusion, and apparent helplessness in which "traditional language must perforce become powerless and remain silent." He wisely saw that the real purpose of this period of relative silence was a deepening of prayer, a return to the roots of our being, in order that out of silence, prayer, and hope we might once more receive from God new words and a new way of stating not our message, but His.