

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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***The Cherubic Pilgrim; The Soul's Spiritual Delight* (1657)** Angelus Silesius (1624-1677)

Setting The Christian read on man's situation expresses itself volubly in the seventeenth century, to which we are indebted both for the most daring moves in math and physical science—Descartes, Leibniz, Newton—and the most penetrating literature of the Christian experience. The literature in question could hardly be more dramatically developed than in the very period of the birth of Angelus Silesius.

The Christian tradition Within the decade surrounding the year of Silesius' birth, 1624, other powerful writers of the Christian experience were born: Blaise Pascal, 1623; John Bunyan, 1628; John Milton 1631. Were one to reach to examples from music and visual art, and to let the temporal canvas fly more broadly, it would soon appear that we find ourselves at a high point in the history of Christianity. Can we embed this observation in our broader issue of 'the coming into being of the modern mind?' Are the early modern moves, toward the self-awarenesses ripening in our own time, still broadly Christian? What has the Christian religion to do with the making of the modern western consciousness?

Christianity and the making of the modern mind The four diverse authors referenced above-- John Milton, Blaise Pascal, John Bunyan, Angelus Silesius—will illustrate the range of ways the Christian perspective can enhance a deepening awareness of the self. For Bunyan the Christian perspective, in *Pilgrim's Progress*, is one of humility, hope, and tenacity, mind-conditions in which the eternal is parcelled out in minima of patience and hope. (Not for a moment to imply that such strengths of the Christian perspective were not rich in the pre-modern social-cultural world, but only that a valence of spiritual availability was being lived into the repertoire of 'modern mind,' which we are going to allow ourselves to say, throughout these entries, continues to deepen the much valued comprehension of human finitude and potential.

Layers of inheritance: John Milton and John Bunyan John Milton, born seven years after Bunyan, and serving his Lord on a level far more lofty and influential than Bunyan's, left for posterity a deeply layered imagination of man's evil and fallen condition, and of the diabolic inventions of the evil, in their readiness to turn the advance of humanity into various shades of the calamity of being human. The seventeenth century reader of Milton and Bunyan—who was in fact the more the more popular of the two, and arguably the more formative for the human advance, the 'modern man' up for tackling his existential condition.

The existential of Christianity: Pascal Pascal's *Pensees* will have spoken most directly to the arts-creators with a new 'modern' Western mind, for whom the sense of the 'poverty of man without god' becomes an illuminated perspective, ripening constantly as the daring and brevity of modern cultural life declares itself. The modern literary mind—think Gabriel Marcel, Graham Greene, T.S. Eliot, Simone Weil, Francois Mauriac—is unthinkable without the world views of any number of innovative traditionalists working in the Catholic vein, while the man on the street is enabled, by the stable if controversial advance of Catholic thinking, to shed light on the darkest issues of living in our time.

The presence of Angelus Silesius in religious conflict A different and unique imprint on the modern mind can be tracked to the kind of Christian thinking we owe to Angelus Silesius, the Catholic priest who was ordained in 1652 and known by his writings throughout the literate Christian world in the centuries after his death. To a great extent, and in a fashion quite different from Milton, Bunyan or even Pascal, Silesius brought fresh understandings of Christianity to the centuries unfolding from the Christian stock.

Silesius and Protestantism Silesius differed greatly, after all, from these other Christian writers: he converted to Catholicism in 1653 opening to himself the way to a priestly career; he entered the Franciscan order; he took Holy Orders in 1661. These decisive steps satisfied a powerful dislike of

Protestantism—we were in the midst the of those religious wars which were rocking sixteenth century France, and which would so savagely impact the mind-world of Montaigne--and Silesius was to pass the bulk of his remaining life in priestly duties, which of course included the considerable weight of his poetry, as well as well as of a great number of tracts, many of which were crafted as anti-Protestant diatribes.

The fresh perspective of Silesius Silesius remains best known for two works of jubilant faith: : *The Cherubic Pilgrim*, 1657, for which Silesius is best known as a poet; 'The Soul's Spiritual Delight,' a collection of more than 200 religious songs, many of which have entered into both Catholic and Protestant hymn books.

The Cherubic Pilgrim The Cherubic Pilgrim is a collection of more than 1600 rhymed couplets dealing with morals and manners, but particularly with the presence of God within human experience; it is this latter relationship, with all its intricacies in the midst of simplicity, that has rendered Silesius congenial and distinctive to elements of the western mind—and to more than a few opponents of what has been called (and decried) by the name of quietism. The insights flowering in Silesius' couplets and epigrams were by some taken to dissolve the soul of the worshipper in the God he worshipped, reducing the individual to a dysfunctional passivity, while for others—examples would be the Quaker movement in religion, or branches of that Buddhism which left its mark on the greener America of the twentieth century. It has been the view of the Catholic Church—which approved the publishing of Silesius' work—that his writings were orthodox in doctrine, and fully acceptable.

An optic onto five couplets of Silesius

1.

*Even before I was Me, I was God in god.
And I can be once again, as soon as I am dead to myself*

Orthodox opinion can raise the question: Is 'dead to myself an acceptable way to describe the 'norm state' from which we can become 'God in god'? Is death the path to being God in god? What were we *before* we were god.' The charge levelled against the Pietists and Quietists, often in the seventeenth century, was that these perspectives minimized the vitality of the process of knowing god, and appeared to advance passivity as the fruitful state for the knowing of God.

2.

*The World doth not imprison Thee.
Thou art thyself the World, and there, within Thyself,
Thou hold'st thyself, thy self-imprisoned Prisoner.*

Silesius' persistent concern is with the nature of the self, which in the previous couplet had in itself the potential to become God, by dying to itself. In the present couplet the self has the potential to be the world, though it has the potential to imprison itself within that world. For the orthodox Christian theologian, of the seventeenth century, the self is a subtly dangerous bridge into identification with the world. Are we looking ahead to William Blake, who, a century later, grows ecstatic over envisioning the 'world in a wildflower?'

3.

*A loaf holds many grains of corn
And many myriad drops the sea.
So is God's oneness multitude,
And that great multitude are we.*

Do God and we flow into one another? (What else can we read, from the last two lines?) Are we not still faced with the problem of quietude, and its strategy of reducing God to man, or man to God? And does that absorptive thought-process not blur out of existence the role of the believing human?

4.

The rose is without 'why,' it blooms simply because it blooms. It pays no attention to itself, nor does it ask whether anyone sees it.

A new register, built over the theme of the interchangeability of God and man. The universe, with its spectrum of diverse beings and attitudes. Is a given. It simply takes place. From this standpoint God and man and the rest of the creation do not exactly intra-exist; the creator and man are co-present, but form a stable ensemble.

5.

*True prayer requires no word, no chant,
No gesture, no sound.
It is communion, calm and still,
With our own godly ground.*

This account of 'true prayer' is the point at which opponents of Silesius' vision step back. They 'have their doubts.' Is any room left in this universe, for 'true difference'? If everything is stable, as is, assumed by everything else, if God and what-is absolutely imply one another, what need or use is there for a Church which becomes the center stage of a dramatic narrative, there to represent the meaning of the universe?

The contribution of Angelus Silesius Angelus Silesius provides one important access point, for the spiritual theme in modern western mind. That mind was obliged to understand itself newly, with the passing of the modern centuries, until, in our own time, seriously spiritual but prone to questioning the dominant Christian narrative, we turn with vivid interest to the mind-remaking of the universe, that turn in consciousness by which we gain an indispensable enrichment of our stance in reality. Humble but wholistic, God-preoccupied but sensitive to the human immensity, Angelus Silesius sustains an honorable line of silence at the heart of the religious experience. What better substantiates the perspective of Angelus Silesius than the thinking of Susan Cain, for many years now a New York Times Best Seller, with her book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* (2012).

Study guide

Silesius passed through a formative stage that deepened his knowledge of Quietism, one meditative Christian theology that emerged during the religious wars of the early Renaissance. Unlike Descartes and Pascal, for instance, Silesius turns to silence and meditation, for the sources of his belief. (Descartes turns to the structure of the created world, while Pascal turns to a crushing analysis of the weakness of man without God.) Historically speaking, Silesius aligns with those German mystics of the Middle Ages, like Tauler and Eckehart, who shared his belief in the depths of interiority. But he also aligns with the modernist Protestant trend, to break with the complex rituals of the Catholic Church. That trend, powerfully driven into our time by Martin Luther and his followers, is a strong instance of the power of change to modernize theology as well as science. Are you friendly to the movement furthered by Silesius? Does it seem to you to be on an enriching course into its future?

Does Silesius contribute to the enrichment of theology, understood as a growing edifice of understandings about our creator? Or would you say that Silesius is an insightful poet, who strikes sharp sparks of brilliant awareness, then passes on? Is the Modernity we track, here, all about the accumulation of knowledge, skills, and self-awareness? (If so, we will have to welcome Silesius as a bringer of insight or awareness, rather than a bringer of 'knowledge.' Are we not, here in Silesius, dealing with a technique of thought, like Buddhist mindfulness techniques, rather than a system devoted to 'advancing knowledge'? And would a system for meditating effectively be a workable step into the future for man? We

face here the problem of what the 'modern mind' means. Is it technical know-how? If so, we will find that the three centuries following 1600, the Renaissance and more, are hardly centuries of practical discovery in western Europe. They are centuries of great development in math, astronomy, and physics, but not in the kinds of practical advance—in transportation, communication, road construction, or industrial organization—which become prominent in the early nineteenth century. The meditative tradition opens spiritual alternatives to the early modern growth spurt, but for larger cultural build ups offers little more than Mahayana Buddhism did to its culture; a lot and little.