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THE APOPHATIC SILENCE OF ST JOSEPH

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Abstract

Focussing on the apophatic silence of St Joseph, reflections are made on the various challenging events in Joseph's life to see how these perplexing and shocking events may have driven him into an equanimous silence that spoke eloquently about his experiences that may be termed as mystical. Challenging experiences are often powerful. When a mystery is experienced, the expression pertaining to it is often incongruent and the language of the mystic is often silence. If at all, an expression of the experience is possible, the one who narrates the experience takes recourse to analogies. However, name, form and expression are so limited that they often lead to confusion. The mystical has often become "terrible" and the ineffability of mystical experience has the spirituals of various traditions have taken recourse to the wisdom of apophasis. As a mystic, Joseph welcomed the numinous as it came knocking at the first Christmas because this experience permeated his consciousness as it had the potential to be an inordinate blessing, even when the aftermath felt chaotic and hard to integrate. Though Joseph was delivered into the Dark Night, while the shock was

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like hell on earth, when it was resolved, it became a gift from God. It is this gift that turned Joseph into a silent monk of a father.

Keywords: Apophatic Theology; John of the Cross; Mystic; Silence; Via Negativa

Introduction

St Joseph is one of the most silent figures of the New Testament. Although he endured much in his obedience and faithfulness, he came out very successfully in his mission as the husband of Mary and father of Jesus. Combing through the gospels, despite his silence, we meet a person who is very versatile in his life and career. In the following reflections on the various challenging events in his life, we see how these perplexing and shocking events may have driven him into an equanimeous silence that spoke eloquently about his experiences that may be termed as mystical.

In this reflection, first of all, we are invited to divest our perception of St Joseph off the mythological elements that popular piety has attributed to him and to take a look at him as a first century Palestinian young Jewish carpenter betrothed a young Palestinian woman, with dreams of a prospective life together like any other average young man of his rustic background. Secondly, we look for reasons that drove him to be so powerful in his silence. Our contention is that on the one hand, the shocking events that transpired in his life one after another and the way that he dealt with all of them drove him to the mystical experience that often ensues these experiences. On the other hand, he would have been the first one in the whole wide world who would hand set his eyes on the word-become-flesh. Both these factors, in various ways, drove him to the pregnant silence that is so characteristic of a person who came face to face with the Divine. In the following discussion, we explore these two factors one by one.

1. Power of Challenging Experiences

Most of the shocking experiences that we encounter in life, faced in the right spirit, become game-changers as turning points in life. Consider the series of tragic events that unfold in the life of Joseph from the perspective of the young Palestinian mentioned above. He is told that his wife whom he loved was pregnant with a child that was not his. His love for his fiancée could be measured from the fact that despite her infidelity and betrayal, he does not want any harm to come to her. Naturally, the more the love that Joseph had for Mary,

the greater the trauma that he would experience. This kind of mental shock or traumas could be subject to analysis to arrive at the possible outcome of the experience.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5 (DSM-5), a traumatic event involves “actual or *threatened death* or serious injury” either to oneself or *to a loved one* and is necessarily followed by a host of symptoms, which span behavioural, psychological, emotional and social functioning.¹ In the Infancy Narrative, reading Mathew’s statement on Joseph’s decision to spare Mary from public disgrace (Mt 1:19) in the light of the Deuteronomical injunction on adultery (Deut 22:22), one can gauge the trauma and mental agony of Joseph. A shock or a trauma is anything that renders the experiencer temporarily powerless in the face of a real or perceived threat. The natural response of the person can be explored physiologically, socially, psychologically theologically or spiritually.

On the top of this shock, adding insult to injury, comes the instruction to him from the angel to be a cuckold of a husband to Mary. Now, he is unable to execute his will of abandoning her on the contrary, he is asked to take her to be his wife (Mt 1:20). Further down the story, the mental tension that Joseph underwent during the journey along with his pregnant wife to Bethlehem and there, “looking for a room at the inn” for Mary to give birth to the child would have been significant. The refusal that he encountered in those crucial moments from all quarters would have aggravated this pressure. Settling for a stable, and patiently converting it into a decent place for the mother and the child, that could be visited by the shepherds would have been excruciating for any young man who used to live a dignified life.

Following the story-line, suppose Joseph and Mary had bonded by the time the child Jesus was to be presented in the temple, during the presentation, Joseph heard the prophet Simeon saying to Mary that her heart would be pierced by a sword. Incomprehension and the resultant confusion caused by the dire warning of Simeon to Mary would have hung over Joseph’s head as another sword for the whole of his life. The saga of traumas would reach its culmination when he learnt that the king was looking for the child to do away with him and that perhaps he had become inadvertently, an accomplice to the “crime” that the child had committed. Without much ado, he left together with his wife and the child before the light of day broke and

¹*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5*, APA 2013, 271-272.

fled the town in the middle of the night and settled as a fugitive and as an asylum seeker in a foreign land.

Once they were back home, as had settled in Nazareth, as they went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the boy Jesus, now 12 years old, was lost in the crowd. Joseph and Mary frantically searched for him for three days. One has to be a father in his protective role to look into the mind of Joseph who has “failed” to keep his family together, in order to understand the anxiety that he was vexed with! Later, when they found Jesus at the temple in the midst of the doctors of the Jewish religion, in silence, he let Mary do the talking and deal with Jesus.

Exploring these experiences of Joseph psychologically, in a purely human fashion, we have a glimpse into the frozen silence of Joseph who might have become numb as he concentrated more on doing than on talking. However, beyond the physiological response, trauma affects people emotionally, psychologically and spiritually. Shock has been the subject of many studies among the psychotherapeutic community for years, and many sufferers of shock and trauma have been found, in addition, experiencing spiritual and highly sensitive extraordinary states, which begs the question: Why do so many people with traumatic or shocking experiences have so much access to mystical experiences?

Sometimes, the shock results in a diminished capacity to make any meaning of the events of one’s life, as the meaningfulness of external events results from their relationship to one’s inner world and vice versa. A trauma can temporarily suspend one’s ability to connect to inner experience, or to build a bridge from the inner self to the outer world, thus eradicating the potential for sense-making, insight and even transcendence. A shock in life brings us face-to-face with our vulnerability. The outcome of this experience is often an untenable dissociation from oneself, feelings of having lost one’s identity, being inexplicably, inconveniently and often violently overcome by reactionary impulses, a deep loss of one’s ability to make meaning of the ineffable. As one experiences all these, one goes into deeper and deeper silence that is highly positive.

2. Experience of the Mystery and Expression

Hand in hand with these shocking experiences of Joseph and their impact, we also need to give a thought to the birth of the Son of God in a manger, with Joseph alone witnessing the deeply profound event. Continuing our consideration of the whole event from the human point of view, we need to consider the impact of God coming in touch with

the human world and the sole witness of the event is Joseph. What language would he use in order to verbalize the visual experience of the Ultimate Reality breaking into the world in a language that common folk could understand? Silence would be the language of the one who beheld the radiance of the Reality in a mystical vision.

In order to make sense of the language of silence that Joseph took recourse to, we look at the comparable experiences and their articulations in the Scripture. In revealing the Pre-existent One as the Father, Jesus painted a verbal picture of his experience of/with that Being (Jn 1:18; 5:20; 6:46; 8:26b). However, when we reflect on this revelation, we need to keep in mind a few facts about communication in general. In the first place, an experience as such cannot be communicated in toto. In modern times, such an experience as the one that Joseph seemed to have had is defined as an intimate and immediate awareness of being touched or grasped by the Divine² (Jn 14:11). The language of the one who experiences the Divine is imagery and symbolism is generally silence. This process begins with the comprehension of the experience through categories. In this step, the choice of categories is important both to comprehend and to communicate the experience. Subsequently, the experience is expressed in symbolic, poetic and/or mythical language or in the language of silence.

3. Language of the Mystic

The divine breaking into the earth must have been a sight that has not been narrated anywhere except in the mystical and poetic imagination.³ The gospel has the narrations of the miraculous bright star that appeared in the sky and the angelic vision that the shepherds in the fields had. Although these narrations could be taken as laced with some mythological elements, yet, they were signifiers of a greater event. If the appearance of the angel, which was only a signifier, filled the shepherds with terror, for the angel to tell them not to be afraid (Lk 2:9-10), how greater would have been the terror that the divine event, the signified, instilled in the heart of Joseph, the sole witness of the event at close quarters?

To give expression to the experience, the mystic either looks for signs and symbols in a given language and culture or goes into

²Kuncheria Pathil and Dominic Veliath, *An Introduction to Theology*, Bangalore: TPI, 2003, 6.

³St Kuriakose Elias Chavara, in his meditations muses on the scene and compares the birth of Jesus with the appearance of the bright moon from the clouds!

silence. The language-bowl of any culture is limited. In the case of Jesus, categories and symbols were chosen from the linguistic and cultural bowl of the Hebrew society in which the Word had assumed flesh. Now, flesh by definition is limited. Assuming the limited human flesh, logos was, to a great extent, limiting itself to a human garb. However, even if it was granted that the logos were omnipotent, yet, almost all his listeners came from the common folk who had a very limited language-bowl. The logos in flesh had to pick signs and symbols from the culture and had to speak a dialect of a particular people who already possessed a highly established idea of God and an elaborate form of ritual worship.⁴ Jesus chose his symbols from his religious, social and political milieu, to communicate his experience. Even in this attempt, he admits his inability (Jn 16:12-13).

Albeit naive, there are times when one wonders what if one were to strip God off the garb that Jesus gave him when he attempted to make him intelligible to the people with whom he lived. If God is stripped off the cultural, religious, linguistic and anthropomorphic garb that he is given in view of getting closer to the Reality, can one ever conceive that Reality? Can human intellect, which is trained to conceive only concepts with properties, be able to contain something devoid of all properties? The possibility of such an abstraction is seen in the studies that Panikkar makes in Prasna Upanishad 5.1-7, according to which, the one who meditates on the Supreme Brahman “will be led by the chants to the world of Brahman. Then he sees the Person who is dwelling in the city of the body who is higher than the highest existence” (Prasna Up. 5.5).⁵ It is important to note that here the Upanishadic expression of the Being, which is higher than the highest is made in personal terms whereas in another place in the same book, the notion of the Supreme is expressed in impersonal terms:

With the syllable OM as his sole support
The wise man attains *that which* is peaceful,
Unaging, deathless, fearless, the Supreme (Prasna Up. 5.7).

⁴ Hermeneutically, one’s understanding is conditioned by “a kind of pre-understanding arising from one’s own life context.” Hence, a revelation employing symbols alien to the people would have fallen on deaf ears. See J.S. Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics, Toward a Theory of Reading as the Production of Meaning*, (trans. R.R. Barr, Spanish Original), Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987, 1.

⁵Panikkar, *Vedik Experience*, 775.

A similar impersonal understanding of the Brahman is seen in Aythareya Upanishad 3.3.5. The Supreme One is seen as the Absolute Conscience itself.

4. Anthropomorphism and Silence

A mystical experience has certain universal qualities, as outlined by Walter Stace. They include things like ineffability and paradox, an abiding sense of unity, and a vital gnosis, which imbues the experiencer with a sense of a deeper truth⁶ that is often inexpressible.

Although the human mind is used to conceive the Reality as having properties, yet, in the final analysis, any anthropomorphic understanding of the Absolute is the projection of our categories and attributes onto the Absolute, for the Absolute was, before anything came to be (Jn 1:1-3). Hence, the general view of the Upanishads on the issue is as follows: “The Upanishads in which we have the culmination of the ancient Indian Philosophy not only denied the personality and multiplicity to be real characteristics of reality, but even identified reality to be the undifferentiated, unqualified and monistic Brahma – the nirguna-brahma.”⁷ The absolute is unqualified (nirguna), while the creation is qualified (saguna), and the absolute is necessary while the creation is contingent.⁸ Whatever we want to talk about the *nirguna*, fails to find words and we slip into silence.

The Absolute is incomprehensible and transcendent and cannot be fully grasped by human intellect. However, an effort is made in Kena Upanishad to picture the silent reaction of the one who experienced the Brahman:

That in the lightning which flashes forth,
which makes one blink and say ‘Ah’.
That ‘Ah’ refers to the Divinity (Kena Up. 29-30).

5. Name, Form and Expression

The incomprehensibility of the Reality does not rule out the possibility of its experience by human beings. Although contingent,

⁶W. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*. London: Macmillan & Co, 1961.

⁷Thomas Kochumuttom, *Comparative Theology: Christian Thinking Spirituality in Indian Perspective*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1985, 32. See also J.G. Arapura, *Hermeneutical Essays on Vedantic Topics*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1986, 29, who holds that Brahman is throughout spoken as attributeless.

⁸ *Chandogya Upanishad with the Commentary of Sankaracarya*, (trans. Swami Gambhirananda), Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1983. p. xxxv. See also Kochumuttom, *Comparative Theology*, 37.

the creation, from time to time, is given to experience the Absolute. However, the symbol one chooses to communicate one's experience is but a pointer to something far beyond itself. Nevertheless, as a symbol it is important and it contains in some measure what it points to.⁹ Hence, it looks as if the poem on the sacred syllable OM in Prasna Upanishad that was cited above oscillates between the theoretical possibility of conceiving the impersonal and the practical implausibility of such comprehension. Human beings need a medium to express the Supreme. This would be the same case with the 'ah' of Kena Upanishad. Alternatively, the immensity of what is comprehended is so awe-inspiring that the cognitive mind and the expressive faculties get frozen before the gargantuan reality and the puny intellect either becomes petrified in silence or fumble for words. What comes out really are "sighs too deep for words" (Rom 8:26).

Rudolf Otto calls both the experience and what is experienced 'numinous' having a spiritual quality indicating the strong presence of the Divinity. A mystic experiences the numinous as he/she journeys "inwards in such a way as to transcend the usual process of the mind, which is normally, much engaged with its social and natural environment."¹⁰ In the process, the mystic penetrates beyond intellect, memory and will, which are the realm of categories and symbols. This experience of the Divine, as seen above, is said to go far beyond the notion of God that we traditionally possess. The analogy of the dress would be in place in this context. We are so used to looking at the colourful dress of the Swiss Guard that without it, he is not recognizable. There is the dress that the eyes are accustomed to and there is a person in it. But the dress is what pops up in the mind when we hear of the Swiss Guard. There seems to be a clash between the traditional notion of God with name and image (dress) and the numinous that is experienced (person).

A mystical experience is considered one of a few non-ordinary states of consciousness much like contemplative states and hallucinogenic states. Sometimes these states are induced. The non-ordinary states of consciousness are brought about by what religious scholar Mircea Eliade refers to as sacred technologies,¹¹ that is, the trance-inducing techniques used by some cultures to engage with the

⁹Pathil, *Introduction to Theology*, 6.

¹⁰Ninian Smart, *The Phenomenon of Christianity*, London: Collins, 1979, 157.

¹¹M. Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964.

spiritual dimension of existence: ecstatic states, communion with the transpersonal realms, and underworld journeying.

Studying the varieties of religious experiences in the world, W. James calls this experience, an *immediate luminosity*¹² which leads us, as Jung has noted, into a *cosmic order*.¹³ During a mystical encounter, one can catch a glimpse of this more vast reality, which very well may challenge all of our previously held rational beliefs about the interconnected web of reality at any given moment and the mystic is overwhelmed by the ever-present flood of potentially meaningful connectivity spiralling, weaving, dancing and dodging all around him/her and in bewilderment, becomes unable to differentiate between what is real and what is not. The language of the expression of such an experience is silence.

The literature on such indescribable experience, as the one that Joseph had at the nativity, which can be called mystical experience, is either found in the language of silence or in symbolic language. It is through analogies that one communicates one's experience of God. The lack of adequate theological categories in the language-bowl makes such writings virtually inaccessible to the commoners.¹⁴ The inadequacy of the symbols notwithstanding, the more esoteric the symbols used in one's medium of expression, the lesser the effect on the targeted beneficiaries, since such uncommon symbols bring confusion to the ordinary folk. Such literature or narration with extra-linguistic references, even in modern times, can be challenging if not intimidating. Hence, perhaps, Joseph takes recourse to complete silence.

6. Wisdom of Apophasis

In the face of the mystical experiences like that of Joseph at the nativity, owing to the lack of adequate symbols to give expression to their experience, some mystics chose to negate and eliminate the possible symbols they thought could help them do just that. Perhaps it is on account of the inadequacy of such categories and symbols that in India, at least part of the Scriptural tradition

¹²W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York, NY: Longmans, Green and Co, 1917.

¹³C.G. Jung, *Collected Works 9i: Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (Trans. R.F.C. Hull), Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959.

¹⁴John Welch, "Mystical Theology", in Joseph A. Komonchak et al. (eds.). *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Bangalore: TPI, 2006, 692-694, 692-693.

abstains from formulating the particularities of any religious experience in verbal articulation. The mystics trying to articulate their experience of the Divine could only delineate it in a negative fashion—*neti, neti...* (Brhdaranyaka Up. 2.3.6).¹⁵ A similar outlook that developed in Christianity much later is called apophatic God-talk. The proponents of this view held that “God transcends all created conceptions that it (apophatic theology) limits itself to statements about what God is not rather than making any claims to know God in himself.”¹⁶

Even though this new-born babe in the manger is the fullness of Revelation, as the unique mediator and revealer of the Father (Jn 1:18), in whom God has spoken in a definitive manner (Heb 1:2) and is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15), he has revealed God to us in symbols. When the logos assumed flesh (Jn 1:14), despite his omniscience, he avoided complex symbols to give expression to his experience both existential and pre-existential. The symbol that he chose to express the Reality that he had experienced was *Father*. The logos assumed flesh in order to give flesh—image, name and form—to the Reality—a symbol that is down-to-earth and commonplace. It made sense both to the rank and file of the society (Jn 7:49) and to the masters (3:10) alike. Karl Rahner would go a step further to state that baby Jesus himself is the symbol of God. However, he qualifies this symbol as the representation, which allows the Other to be there¹⁷ because a symbol contains in some measure what it points to. Here, Jesus who himself is the symbol contains in the fullest possible measure what he points to (Heb 1:3). This is perhaps the Johannine understanding of Jesus when he declares his oneness with the Father: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9; 10:30; 17:11). Joseph must have been the first one to lay eyes on that Father.

7. Ineffability of Mystical Experience

One of the hallmarks of mystical experiences is their ineffability, which makes discourse rather intricate at times. As a result of the renaissance of mystical experiences, we have gained new

¹⁵Sankara comments that this negation is a device to teach the student about the student’s own status as Brahman. See Arapura, *Hermeneutical Essays on Vedantic Topics*, 112.

¹⁶*New Dictionary of Theology*, 48.

¹⁷Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* 4, Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966, 225.

epistemologies, ontologies and phenomenologies for understanding and studying these experiences. It could not be happening at a more opportune time, for in this hypermodern world, which normalizes disconnection from self, other and nature, we are collectively experiencing the malaise of spiritual bankruptcy and lack of meaning—a total blackout. However, despite the utility of the terrifying events in providing a window into mystical experiences, much of what we know about these states come from the fields of theology, spirituality and psychology.

Only when one is fully aware of the divine transcendence, one avoids the danger of confusing God with the images that one uses in speaking of him and goes into silence. This applies also to those to whom God has revealed himself in his word made flesh the first of whom is Joseph.¹⁸ Making research on the Functional neuroanatomy of altered states of consciousness, A. Dietrich, notes that mystical experiences produce a state of *transient hypofrontality*,¹⁹ wherein it may feel as if the mind is no longer blinded by personal identity and the *doors of perception* are open. The mystical encounter can result in lasting positive changes in the lives of individuals. These changes include great levels of openness, mental wellbeing and greater levels of silence.

8. Mystical Becoming Terrible

According to Rudolph Otto, an encounter with the *numinosum*, that is, the self-evident ineffable essence of the *immediate luminosity* always contains something of the *mysterium tremendum*, or the tremendous, awe-and-terror-inspiring mystery. According to Otto, this sort of encounter feels life-threatening from the perspective of the person, a point he explores through the de facto existence of earth-shattering fear when one finds oneself in the presence of the numinous.²⁰ This experience that is mystical can also be life-altering.²¹ A mystical encounter with the numinous, which contains no small amount of dread according to Otto, can have the effect of catalyzing lifestyle

¹⁸Pathil, *Introduction to Theology*, 158.

¹⁹A. Dietrich, "Functional Neuroanatomy of Altered States of Consciousness: The Transient Hypofrontality Hypothesis," *Conscious Cog.* 12, 2 (2013 June) 231-256.

²⁰R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, Trans. John W Harvey, London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1950.

²¹ Cf. K.A. MacLean, M.W. Johnson, R.R. Griffiths, "Mystical Experiences Occasioned by the Hallucinogen Psilocybin Lead to Increases in the Personality Domain of Openness," *Journal Psychopharmacol* 25 (2011) 1453-1461.

changes, inspiring one to participate more fully in co-creating their life, and revolutionizing a sense of meaningfulness in one's psyche.²²

While the description of mystical experiences and the subsequent positive changes sound highly desirable, the secret of mysticism is that often the transit to such mystical revelations involve, dread, fear, panic and disillusionment, which leads the person to a shocking void, which incessantly begs questions of life's meaning. Here the person is pulled into the infinite experience of being sucked into the vortex of the whirlpool. For most people, deliverance from these shockingly dark experiences is often experienced as radiance, transcendence or a brilliant, indescribable blissfulness. The classic, desirable mystical experience or even trance is not much different.

The involvement of darkness and deep fear in mystical experiences is not new. Mystics from numerous traditions write about the pain of surrender, the terror of encountering the numinous,²³ or the phenomenal shattering, which must occur to purge the mind of illusion. Perhaps the most famous account of this experience comes from the Christian mystic, St John of the Cross, who details with painstaking clarity his own loss of identity and discovery of divinity in *The Dark Night of the Soul*. For John of the Cross, the way to God was through a journey of faith and love beyond images and thought. His way of knowing God is said to be a prime example of apophatic mysticism, where God is nothing, yet everything.²⁴ 'Dark night of the soul' is now quite commonly used to refer to the necessary darkening which occurs along many individual spiritual journeys like that of Joseph.

There is a purgative aspect in John's account of the *via negativa*. This negative way is the way of divestment, of ridding oneself of everything standing between self and God, of purging of falsehood. John's painful experience of the purging of all falsehood leads to the mystical encounter. This radical purging is necessary because if one is to have the vision of God, everything that is unlike God in oneself must be purged.²⁵ This process of purging, walking the *via negativa* of John of the Cross, or endeavouring to engage in any other number of practices, which might cause someone to question their rational

²²R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, Trans. John W. Harvey, London: Oxford University Press; 1950.

²³Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*.

²⁴*New Dictionary of Theology*, 696.

²⁵C.M. Bache, *Mysticism and Psychedelics: The Case of the Dark Night* in *Journal of Religion and Health*, 30 (1991) 215-236.

beliefs of separation or their engrained notions of identity, is subjectively and objectively shocking.

As John of the Cross notes, as a result of the experience, one's wilful actions are thwarted by something that is experienced as a divine intervention. It has the effect of alienating oneself from previous social circles and behaviour patterns. It poses an enormous challenge to previously held worldviews, cultural norms and one's sense of self. In this way, much like the dark night of John of the Cross, one's personal encounter with the numinous is akin to trauma.

Even though shocking, Joseph welcomed the numinous as it came knocking at the first Christmas because this experience permeated his consciousness as it had the potential to be an inordinate blessing, even when the aftermath felt chaotic and hard to integrate. We need to bear in mind the fact that, though Joseph was delivered into the Dark Night, while the shock is like hell on earth, when it is resolved, it becomes a gift from God. It is this gift that turned Joseph into a silent monk of a father.