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IN THE ONTIC HUMAN CENTRE! SOLITARINESS OVERCOME BY SOLITUDE

I

Systems of metaphysics, irrespective of their advocacy of permanence or change as the stuff of reality, have generally overlooked their corollary viz. things are alone. Collectivity of similar things under a generic name is, to be sure, a practical necessity in human discourse, but things are ontically alone. None grasped this truth more perceptively than Buddha: Things are unique particulars *(svalakṣaṇa)*; subjected to the inexorable law of momentariness, they undergo change-but alone. Likewise, to some other systems, the immutable substances, material or spiritual, remain immutable in all their aloneness. It is not only the inorganic, but also the organic, world that is lonely: Every living creature is born alone, grows alone and dies alone. Its so called gregarious, or social, development is nothing other than the following of a pattern of nurture in accordance with a definite set of laws of nature. In all the phases of development that the living creatures pass through, they do not at any time cease to be solitary, even when they happen to be male and female living together; or when certain species of them are said to be particularly gregarious or 'colonized.' Man too here is solitary. No doubt, he is said to be social but he is solitary in society. Insofar as he is 'concorporated,' he is also separated from other bodies and, being thus separated is at once being solitary. But there is something special about man's being solitary: He alone *experiences* solitariness. In the course of this essay I address myself to two distinct, but closely related, questions: What is the source of human solitariness? Can it ever be overcome? While the title of the essay directly answers the first question, the subtitle is indeed suggestive of an answer to the second question, however paradoxical it may seem. Between the answers to these two questions, I shall explicate the many human faces of solitariness. My perspective however is that of Christianity, a different perspective should be equally possible though.

All that is created is essentially solitary, a character that is pre-eminently realized in the case of man. In man solitariness is realized at two levels, ontological and epistemological (call it psychological, if you so wish). Solitariness is an essential element of his *being*; it is part and parcel of his existence, his created heritage. Being unable to endure it, he may seek to escape from it. But his attempt is bound to be futile because solitariness, being an element of his ontic structure, cannot be escaped; it would be graphically trying to jump out of his skin. Secondly, solitariness, far from being abstract, is what is concretely experienced. Man can have a *knowledge* that he is solitary. Of all the created beings, it is only man who is endowed with the knowledge of his solitariness disturbingly. Therefore, such a knowledge of solitariness is to him at once a source of restlessness and anxiety. He can ask pertinent questions about it, formulate tentative answers to it, and even seek imaginatively diversions to cover it up. But, he has to live with his solitariness that is inherent in his being and knowing. Thus, contrary to what some people would make us soothingly believe in social cliches, every man is an island. Community is not inherent in his nature, unlike it is within the heart of the Holy Trinity. None, not even God, can seemingly take away man's solitariness, for that would go against man's essential endowment

But, did not God succeed in taking away man's solitariness, when he created Eve and gave her to Adam, as is evidenced in the Biblical myth? I wish to explore an answer to this question by way of analysing first yet another similar myth in a different religious culture. I believe that the myths within religious cultures contain deep insights into the essential human predicament. Some of them at least seem to have recognized solitariness to be an important feature of human predicament. Thus, there is the Vedic cosmogonic myth that biologically accounts for the 'one becoming many' through the creative heat (*tapas*). The one that was eternally existent is said to have desired to be many in order to overcome boredom. It falls (*pat*) to the ground and splits itself into two parts, one male and the other female (*pati* and *patni*), of the different species successively. The two halves of respective species sexually copulate to populate the earth with all the living creatures, including human beings. The question, if the primeval one, or *puruṣa*, overcame its solitariness by way of becoming many, is not faced by the Vedic poet. Possibly because he knows too well the desolateness of human heart. But we may suggest that the very logic of populating

the earth with the countless species is indicative of the failure of the primeval being in overcoming its boredom by way of giving rise to multiplicity. There then can be the experience of solitariness in the midst of multiplicity of the like or the unlike. The Upaniṣadic insight that the individual liberation lies at the heart of social liberation, if there be anything that goes by that name, is an outgrowth of the Vedic cosmogonical anthropology.

The message of the Biblical account of the creation of Eve, too, seems to refer to features of human predicament. Yahweh remarks, after the completion of the creation of all the living and the non-living beings of the earth, the seas and the heavens, and also of Adam, who is set as the master over the entire created order, that 'it is not good for man to be alone'. In order to overcome for man the situation described as not good, Eve is created out of Adam's rib and given to the latter as his helper and mate. Adam and Eve recognize each other as 'the flesh of my flesh and the bone of my bone.' Recognizing their original oneness, they now long to be one. The Biblical myth has about it a remarkable intuition into the human nature in general and of human sexuality, in particular, not always acknowledged by the militant feminists. Insofar as both man and woman owe their ontic being to God, there is no differentiation of the sexes as male and female. Insofar as they constitute two halves of the same human nature, there is neither the superiority nor the inferiority of one over the other, based on gender. Rather man and woman, being the equal parts of a unitary whole (of human nature), naturally long to be one again. This is the mythical apprehension of the essential unity of all human beings as well as of the differentiation and the mutual attraction of the opposite sexes.

Notwithstanding the intuition of the Biblical myth into the essential unity of human nature and the human sexuality, I would however like to view this myth from a different perspective to serve my present concerns: Did Yahweh succeed in overcoming man's solitariness? I am afraid, he did *not*. This is borne out from the subsequent myth of the Fall. Adam and Eve may have constituted a social 'association', a familial community and a kinship group, but in their ontic being they remain strictly individuals. Thus it would appear that the woman, ontically solitary, is given to the man, equally solitary ontically; and the *vice versa*. Even in their mutual self-giving, they recognize their indisputable individuality: they individually address God; they individually give their explanations of and the excuses

for the proven disobedience; nay more, they even add a note of mutual accusations to their excuses. Yahweh, too, seems to have acknowledged their essential individuality: He listens to their individual explanations, excuses and even accusations, holds them individually responsible for their deeds and apportions to them individually their punishment. The myth, then, while upholding the individuality of every human being, also illuminates unmistakably the solitary predicament of human nature. That man and woman cannot be so united as to overcome their loneliness is, as per my perspective, a fundamental truth imbedded in the myth.

Augustine's confused rapture at the 'happy sin' (*felix culpa*) that facilitated the coming of the redeemer may be cunningly used, if not by a theologian but, by a sexologist to refute my thesis: The Fall has happily opened up the possibility of the intimate union of the sexes. One might even argue from here that in the ecstasy of love, or in the intimate union of sexes, solitariness is overcome; and that *ex hypothesi* God may be said to have succeeded in overcoming in man the state that He perceived as not good for him. But, not so! To be sure, solitariness is overcome in the moment of union; if love did not possess this power, it would not be a form of ecstasy. I am not speaking here of animal sex, but of human sexuality where the validity of ecstasy may indeed be presumed to be guaranteed, in the act of absolute self-giving without any reservation. In such ecstatic moments there may be genuine experience of one self merging into another self. But, howsoever great this moment of ecstasy be, the difficulty with it is that it is, as the term rightly indicates (*histanai*+*ex*), momentary. For one returns sooner from this ecstatic moment to the natural state of solitariness than he entered it! Nay more, solitariness may now be felt all the more oppressively in the realization of the thought that the ecstatic moment is over and could not be infinitized, or immortalized. At times, it may so happen that the realization of the oppressive solitariness may even cripple the human psyche to such an extent that one may end up with a sense of deep disgust to, and a revulsion from, the intimacy of sexual union. There is a sudden realization that one has given of oneself too much to the other; it may be in the form of a feeling of incohate jealousy to guard one's aloneness; it can also assume the form of a self-remonstration that one has so exposed his aloneness as to diffuse one's self. The truth of the statement is amply borne out in our experience of shame, when we are exposed either in our body or mind; we do not easily lay bare our intimacy to another, we try to hide our body and mind alike. We are no different from Adam and Eve who, on discovering their

nakedness, try to hide it; we too try to hide our nakedness and guard our solitariness. Tillich captures the truth with a rare insight, as he writes,

> Man and woman remain alone even in the most intimate union. They cannot penetrate each others innermost center.[1]

This is because man is a 'being centred within himself.'

This one fundamental truth of human nature is sought to be banished from our consciousness by modern social sciences in their attempts, at times to prove themselves as deterministically scientific or at times as equally deterministically the sciences of collectivities. But the fact is that there cannot be a 'science of man' in the strict sense; nor can there be a science in the strict sense of the collectivity of man; they are science only by courtesy. The philosophical opposition to all forms of reductive, behaviouristic and psychologistic studies of 'anthropology' stems from the insight that man is irreducibly centred within himself. A scientific determinism in regard to himself is refuted by man by his capacity not merely of bursting forth into spontaneity but also of withdrawing himself at will into his solitariness. To be sure, he is a *Dasein*, a spatio-temporal being. But, as *Dasein* he personally and freely acts upon the *Umwelt* and socially interacts with the *Mitwelt*. But, both free action and interaction are made possible to him precisely because he is centred within himself. It must however be noted that being centred within himself is at once a privilege and a curse: Privilege because it redounds to his autonomy and greatness. In virtue of his autonomy (of the spirit), he is made a co-creator with God. He is at the zenith of the created world, himself a creature though. It is his privilege to name all that is created and thus establish and assert his overlordship over them, consistent with the profound significance of the Semitic act of naming. He can transcend the world around him, stand apart from it to investigate it, know it, love it, hate it and even reshape it the way he wants. Curse because, being centred within himself, man is thrust into solitariness. And, solitariness, as we have seen already, gnaws at the depth of his being. When he was made the master of the world, he was set apart, in the very act of establishing him in supremacy, from the world that would at least make him forget that he was alone. But this was not to be! He then has to pay a price for being centred within himself and a co-creator with God, and the price is his solitariness.

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1. Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now*, (New York : Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963 edn.), p.17. I am grateful to Tillich for the many ideas in this essay.

Being endowed with an impenetrable centre however bestows on him the essential character of being human. For only such a being has the capacity to commune with another centre of subjectivity: it has the capacity both to address and be addressed as a 'you.' Likewise only such a being can address the Eternal Thou as a 'Thou' and be addressed by the Eternal Thou as a 'you.' It is the great mystery of human encounter and communication that language of address, more precisely human speech, is made possible only among beings possessed of impenetrable centres. For a language of address presupposes that the addresser and the addressee stand in a relation of mutual presence. Only such a being has the capacity to know and choose between good and evil, right and wrong, true and false, ugly and beautiful – in short, to determine its own destiny. In other words, only the being with an impenetrable centre is truly free: Only free man is human. Buber, convinced of this truth in human nature, advocates with a profound insight that an encounter between 'subjectivities' should aim at being essentially a presence to each other.[2] Failure in this regard will only make of the other a demonic double, the projected evil on to the other.[3] Sartre's existential psycho-analysis of human consciousness is an eloquent testimony to human nature that has come to transform the great privilege into a curse.[4]

Man is sole and solitary. These two important aspects of human nature are not always represented in our language with a hermeneutical fidelity. The former may be represented as solitude whereas the latter as solitariness. The former is our ontic centre but the latter is the sickness of the soul. In virtue of the former there flow the manifold expressions of the creativity of the human spirit, scientific, technological, philosophical, artistic, literary and religious etc. In virtue of the latter, however, there flow the manifold expressions of such psychic sicknesses as schizophrenia, manias, phobias, sadism, masochism and even violent

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2. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, (New York : Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958 edn.); *Between Man and Man*, (London : Kegan Paul, 1947) ; *The Knowledge of Man*, (New York : Harper & Row, 1965).

3. Betty Cannon, " The Demonic Double' and Early Education for Peace", in *Education for Peace :* Testimonies from World Religions, Edts. Haim Gordon and Leonard Grob, (Maryknoll, New York : Orbis Books, 1987).

4. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, (New York : Philosophical Library, 1956) pp.557-574.

forms of dementia. When we meet the Buddha in his sublime composure and the noble silence, or Jesus recollected and alone on the mountains, we encounter their spirits in supreme solitude; their total being is centred within themselves. If Gāndhi found the need for practising silence one day a week, it was neither for political diplomacy nor for social expediency. It was rather primarily to sigh with his spirit that, as though it were the source of all spiritual energy, strengthened his active life, the remaining days of the week. All great souls have discovered a divine power within solitude that we in vain seek elsewhere. Solitariness, on the other hand, may be represented as the source out, of which flow all forms of morbidity that only human beings are capable of. The psalmist (*Ps.*25), brooding over his solitariness and affliction, possibly refers to this sickness unto the death of spirit. Hitler is said to have every now and then grown silent and grave and agonizingly brooding over his solitariness. His generals had come rightly to fear their Führer's silence more than his eloquence. For his speech was predictable but his silence was not; and precisely because of this the latter was demoniacally destructive. Psychiatrists are only too well acquainted with the power of the darker recesses of human psyche, born of solitariness, to need elaborate explication: Solitariness is a demoniac power.

II

Solitariness can assume many human faces. It is not unlikely that we ourselves may have at times put on some of these faces or at least come across many a one in our neurotic culture. If we have had the misfortune of coming under its stranglehold, we know too well its depressive power; we also know the struggle that we had to make in order to come out of its mortal clutches. The canker of solitariness, when it takes root in human spirit, has its own characteristic symptoms. Nonetheless, it is never too late for man to seek a cure from it. We may roughly categorize seven forms of solitariness.

To begin with, there is the most universally experienced form of solitariness to which all of us have been subjected at some time or other in our life. It is the solitariness that we come to experience at the departure of someone loving us (or loved by us). It may be a temporary departure, due to the vicissitudes of modern way of living, or a permanent one, due to death. The departure may be of one's spouse, child, parent,

friend, the peer of the group, the professional colleague and others, with whom we enjoyed moments of intimacy, friendship, collegiality and so on. Solitariness in question may be the experience of the pangs of love at the absence of the beloved, much yodelled and romanticized by the poets. Buddha had his deep insight when, in the context of placing before us the first of the four noble truths *(sarvaṁ duḥkhaṁ)*, he found it necessary to explicate the truth by adding that it is not only the union with the unpleasant but also separation from the pleasant that is sorrowful. Thus, separation from the one who loved us throws us suddenly back to our solitariness. For until then the loving one had made us forget that we are solitary. But his sudden departure not only disorganizes us but also throws us open into the solitariness of our soul. This solitariness may be experienced either temporarily or at prolonged intervals. There are people to whom this kind of solitariness can be quite shattering: it can develop into malignant melancholy only to mature gradually into morbidity and, then, all of a sudden to manifest itself into irrational violence, mostly against themselves though.

Secondly, there is the solitariness that is born out of one's inadequacy to cope with the demands of the group in which one is forced to live. Both in its origin and nature, it is socio-psychological. Imagine a lucky person, if at all there ever exists such a person, who has not had the misfortune of going through the trauma of separation from those who love him and generally make him forget his solitariness. But it may so happen that even such a person may shrink from the group; the group itself may make him sick; he cannot stand the crowd; he has developed a demophobia. In the midst of the crowd that he moves in, he is solitary. He withdraws from the crowd, as though wanting to protect his solitariness. Most people however are not as fortunate as our imaginarily lucky person. They are rather driven crazy by the demands the group and the society make on them. Society can be exacting and demanding with its role and status determinations and sanctions invoked, both negatively and positively, with all its moral and jural overtones. There surely are people who suffer from a sense of inadequacy in the group and its corresponding solitariness. Students of social psychology are well acquainted with this type of solitariness. They are aware that some people are temperamentally unsuited to live in groups. They are not strong enough to cope with the pressures of the crowd, especially in a society where there is cut-throat competition.

They are weak because they can neither acquire nor exercise a definite role in the group and the society they live in. It is possible that something went wrong in their childhood, that makes them now flee the group. They flee into their solitariness and suffer quietly in it. Little wonder that social psychology draws heavily upon depth psychology. This form of solitariness is also a sickness of the soul; people who suffer from it may need psychological counselling and psychiatric therapy, to say nothing of occasional tranquillizers.

There is a form of solitariness that come to affect those, who may be said to be the strong ones of the society, who enjoy the crowd, who have even acquired specific roles and status in the society, however paradoxical it may seem. Their social achievements may be valued to be so great that they are envied readily by the role defining psychologists and sociologists. They could be said ungrudgingly to ride at the pinnacle of social success. Even these people may fall a prey to a kind of solitariness. Their solitariness is in some sense self-created. This is because, inspite of their desire to be transparent to others, they may still end up with a feeling that they are not adequately understood by others; that they are not like the rest of the mankind. They would say that their greatest tragedy is their not being understood. However true this may be, the great ones of the group often create their own suffering. For, instead of acknowledging the mystery of person in the world of inter-subjectivity, they are less than charitable to others' person, besides confusing their own personality as endowed with the imaginary qualities they think they possess. Hence, the blame of not being understood is always put on the other; the other becomes the evil incarnate. His own goodness is constituted out of the imaginary paragon of virtues, whose total negation is projected as evil onto the other. They too suffer a solitariness that drives them to the point of sickness. The gnawing sense of not being understood thus can make the great ones of the group withdraw from the group. They come to feel solitary in the midst of the crowd that they used to climb up socially. People under the spell of this type of solitariness hunger for recognition without satiation; they seek to bolster their ego without let or hindrance, because they both entertain, and suffer from, a larger-than-life-image. It is only natural that they become victims of their own illusion, at times, hallucinations. For, when the recognition that they sought after does not come their way, or does not clamber to the illimitable degree they unworthily laid claim on, they feel lonely and let down. They tend to withdraw quietly, but more often violently, from the crowd. They end up complain-

ing that either justice is not done them or that others do not deserve the gift of themselves. They are not prepared to admit the one important truth that the mystery of person is never totally comprehended even by oneself. Solitariness felt by such people, too, is a form of psychic sickness born out of an exaggerated self-importance.

Rejected love is yet another source of a form of solitariness. There are people who sincerely make an attempt to love and also expect to be loved reciprocally. But, unfortunately their love is not only not reciprocated but also rejected. This situation may give rise to an acute sense of solitariness in direct proportion to their expectations. This form of solitariness too is a sickness because they expect as a matter of right what should spontaneously and freely come as a gift. Indeed, it is a peculiar type of solitariness. Initially one comes to 'enjoy' the pain of solitariness, it is masochistic in nature. One imagines himself to be a martyr for the noble sentiment of love, much sung and immortalized by the poets. It is only a matter of time before one begins to feel the oppressive pain of solitariness. The sence of solitariness now begins to verge on morbidity, gradually even to a point of growing dangerous. It has within itself the potentiality of developing into hatred and bitterness, directed against the object' of his love. The initial infatuation grows into one-sided love which, on being rejected, grows into demoniac despair and easily transforms itself into violence against the rejector of his love. This form of solitariness that manifests itself into a neurotic despair is not uncommon in any society, the more so in our own modern, free and inhibitionless societies.

There is a slightly variant experience of a solitariness, born of a frustrated love. Here, a rejected love is experienced on a much nobler plane; failed love is experienced as a form of solitariness but without rancour or bitterness: A union of love may have abruptly come to an end; it may not have existed at all in the first instance. Yet, nothing is claimed as a matter of right. One only hopes against hope, but it is bound to be disappointed. It is difficult to free oneself from the situation of solitariness either by the power of one's own love or by the power of love from any other directions. It is possible that the experience of this form of solitariness can radically, often creatively, change a man but, alas! not necessarily. For it also has the destructive power of quietly taking of the person the zest of life itself and turn him into a cynic and a misanthrope.

Religious existentialists draw our attention to a form of solitariness emerging out of guilt. Kierkegaard is forthright in stating that it is 'sin', or guilt, that binds man to Christianity. Christianity's characterization as a religion of hope and salvation is rooted in the concept of guilt. Even generally speaking, religions everywhere have sought to guarantee man against the sense of guilt, cosmic illusion *(maya-avidya)* etc., considered primarily as a state of being rather than an individual act of commission or omission judged in terms of the violation of ethical prescripts. In the Christian tradition sin is not so much an act of transgression of ethical laws as the state of human predicament; it is therefore constitutive of human nature. This is not to deny that there can be guilt that stems from the act of commission. It is only meant to suggest that an individual evil act presupposes a propensity to evil, which is ontological rather than moral in nature. Guilt then, in either of the senses, is primarily a sin against our being. Our guilt, hidden and open alike, is what we are alone with. We experience its solitary oppressiveness; it is oppressive because by nature it is a form of judgement. Hence this form of solitariness is pervasive of all other forms of solitariness. Dostoevsky has insightfully depicted this oppressive nature of guilt in his *Crime and Punishment*, that goes beyond its psychological and forensic manifestations. Oppressive solitariness is the punishment of the crime that has turned the criminal into its victim. If this solitariness is not expeditiously overcome, it can kill man not only spiritually and psychologically but also physically. The desperate cry on the part of the religious man for salvation from sin is the natural cry of any human heart, irrespective of the latter's avowed belief or disbelief in any form of transcendentalism.

Finally, there is a form of solitariness that encounters us in the anticipation of the hour of death. Heidegger thinks of his *Dasein* to be a being-unto-death. It is not that this solitariness is born of death but that it arises from our task of having to die. It is a task because man alone is conscious of the fact that he has got to die. Any amount of talking out about death with platitudes that man is mortal cannot mitigate the pain of solitariness, resultant upon our consciousness of death. Moreover, at the actual hour of death, the presence of any number of people, howsoever dear to us, will not lessen the sense of our ultimate solitariness; if anything, it only heightens our lone predicament; care and concern, tears and toils, searching eyes, attentive ears and serving hands around the death-bed cannot obliterate my consciousness that it is my death that is awaited in the room. Death

cuts us off from the world of persons and things alike that may have given us a cover so far from our solitariness. Thus the solitariness encountered in the anticipation of death too, if we are not armed with the right attitudes, can assume the form of mortal sickness.

Before concluding this section, I would like to reiterate that solitariness is a sickness that can affect only a human spirit, – a spirit capable of solitude. Therefore both the symptoms of, and the cure for, solitariness must be traced to the ontic human centre. The sickness of solitariness and its cure by way of solitude are the specific modes of spirit's assertion over matter. Both solitariness and solitude are deeply rooted in human nature. Even such a person, who has as yet not gone through the solitariness of separation, who enjoys the company of friends and relatives, who has had a clearly defined social role and status, who is not misunderstood by others but who possesses the treasures in his personality, who has not had the misfortune of rejected love but enjoys the intimacy of sex as a healthy human being, and who, above all, did not allow the sense of guilt and death to overpower his zest for life, – may all of a sudden be subjected to a feeling of solitariness. Solitariness may burst forth out of the crowd and the constructed world, and make him feel his ultimate isolation. He may quietly withdraw from all that he was engaged in, as if to guard the boundaries of his being. He might wish to seek a harmony between his inner state of mind and the outer environment. It is as if he were blinded and paralysed, in having peeped into his own human predicament. He questions the ultimate significance of his being and becoming, and sinks into the depths of his soul.

III

Is there a way for overcoming the many forms of solitariness to which human nature is heir to? My answer is in the affirmative. If solitariness is the morbid and violent constituent of our nature, its antidote must be a salutary and peaceable constituent of the same nature. Such constituent is solitude. That solitude is natural to man is evident from the fact that even the socio-psychologically fully integrated personality occasionally breaks out of the crowd in search of solitude. Solitude then is that in which we deeply and serenely feel what we ontically are, i.e. our essential aloneness. I say deeply and serenely because, unlike in solitariness, we encounter our aloneness with joy and courage. If turbulence, horror and pain are experienced in solitariness, tranquillity,

trust and joy are experienced in solitude. One may look askance at the statement that solitariness is overcome by solitude, but it is the great paradoxical truth of our nature.

There are many ways to seek and experience solitude. In a sense, everyone of them is 'religious' way. This is because religion is an enterprise to discover what we are ontically. It is a moot point if in the enterprise one discovers oneself as rooted in God, after the Semitic tradition, or as a realized 'divinity,' after the most oriental traditions. In either case there is substance in the definition given of religion by Freud that religion is what man makes out of his solitariness and solitude, although in an entirely different sense from the Freudian sense of psycho-mythology.

Martin Buber in his insightful work, *I and Thou*,[5] highlights on a mode of solitude that man now and then practices. He speaks of the possibility of raising nature, if only for a short while, to the status of a 'thou' and of communing with. Man, be it the Vedic poet or the Greek philosopher or the contemporary scientist or technocrat, has always longed for the silence of nature. Silence of nature is a 'speech' without voices and words. Greatness of nature consisted to man in its capacity to speak to him in silence. It is not without reason that the sacred arboreal cults of the Hindus, Buddhists and the ancient Druids came to be a fascinating religious practice. Likewise the mountain peaks acquired the sacred character of being the peaceful divine abodes. The rustling of leaves, the murmurs of waves and the majesty of the mountain peaks beckoned man silently to commune with; they were nature's mute but potent talk. But, this silence lasts only for a short while because it is the kind of silence/talk that cannot really answer the many questions that surge in man's mind and heart, even regarding the mystery of nature itself. Dissatisfied man soon turns to his work-a-day world from his excursions with the silence of nature. Nonetheless, man has from time to time recourse to nature to discover his own solitude deep in his ontic centre.

Secondly, there is a way of getting into solitude by reading poetry, listening to music, contemplating ideas and engaging oneself into artistic pursuits etc. Many people do discover this way solitude and enjoy it. But this solitude, too, lasts only for a while, though, to be sure, considerably longer than the one obtained through nature. For the

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5. Martin Buber, Op. cit.

demands of life, especially of modern ways of living, wrenches us back to the harsh realities of the hurly-burly world. Nay more, it is possible that deceptions against our need for solitude can sneak in; we often indulge in the practice of 'false consciousness,' insofar as we use the demands of life to cover our solitariness, instead of meeting it squarely for the sake of overcoming it through solitude. Indeed, such deceptions have become characteristic of our age. At times everything in our society seems to have been geared up, from mass media to the types of housing we live in, to make us forget that we are sole and solitary. Our solitariness is sought to be covered by the institutions and styles of life in our 'open' society. Neither our educational systems, formal and informal, nor forms of community living in families, churches, factories and so on, seem to be sensitive to our need for a moment of, or a place for, solitude. They are all adapted more often than usual to do away with a simple sense of privacy. We try to cover up our solitariness by burying ourselves in the crowd; we submerge our individuality, afraid, as it were, to authenticate our existence by way of solitude.

Christianity is a prophetic religion. A prophetic religion is a religion of praxes but, may it be noted, impelled by a spirit strengthened by solitude. This is more than evident in the life of its founder who from time to time took leave of the multitudes that thronged around him, to betake himself to the mountains to be alone with the alone.

The prophetic charism that operates in the Semitic tradition, in general, and in Christianity, in particular, necessarily presupposes solitude. The prophetic mission may be received by the Christian in solitude, when he has long prepared for it in solitude. But, more often, the prophetic mission is thrust upon him. It may so happen that he is first driven into solitude by the strong hand of God. It is possible that an individual on his own does not want to carry on this mission, but he has no alternative because the spirit of God is upon him; it has gripped him in a way that he cannot say No to it. He henceforth speaks what the spirit puts into his mouth, irrespective of the consequences it is likely to bring about; whatever happens to him now is for God's purpose. Jeremiah is said to sit *alone* and reflect because 'God's hand is on him.'

God may make of anyone a Jeremiah in the modern context. He may require of him to face and answer the question of truth that is likely to

unsettle him and his fellowmen. He may want him to ask the question of oppression of, and injustice to, the marginated of the society, that can directly bring him into conflict with the rich and the powerful, the privileged and the monopolists of the society; such questions may bring upon him suffering, and even death, as it happened to such counter-culturists as Jesus and the many revolutionaries. He may want him to protest against the prevalent inhumane conditions institutionalized and legitimised into the modes of modern life; such protests can easily earn for him disrepute and discomfort. In short, God may expect of him to penetrate to the boundaries of his being, where the mystery of life begins to unravel. This invariably may call for a transvaluation of all values, that at once cuts through the socio-cultural, at times, even religious ground which he is stably standing on and draw sustenance from. But, may it be noted, all these questions can be asked and answered, and situations responded to, only in the context of solitude. This is because we need to stand transparent before God to face these questions and situations. Being transparent before God, indeed, means being in solitude before the God of solitude; for God is not in commotion. Just as the prophets receive their mission in solitude, therefore in dread but also in faith and hope, all great souls experience the creative pangs in solitude, which in mystical language is known as the 'dark night of the soul'. Thus solitude is an essential condition for every form of creativity, not merely for the origin of a creative act but also for sustaining oneself in a state of creativity. It is not without reason that a conscious cultivation of solitude is often resorted to by men of a high degree of genius.

I now turn to the question. What happens to the soul in solitude, in the process of overcoming solitariness:

In the first place, it needs to be stated unhesitatingly that solitude is not easy to anyone who ventures onto it. It was not easy either to Buddha or to Jesus. It may at times appear even more oppressive than solitariness itself which it seeks to overcome. For in solitude one encounters oneself, not as a unitary blissful self but as a battlefield of a duplex nature, for good and evil, for right and wrong, for the infinite and the finite, for the eternal and the temporal, for the immortality and death, – in short, for God and Satan. Duplex nature because man meets himself as a brittle unity of such warring tendencies within himself that he cries out in despair: 'I do what I do not want, and do not what I want'. Thus it would appear that, in solitude, one is pitted against everything, including oneself: One is pitted against evil in and around oneself: One is pitted

against the great temptation of 'mara,' the 'wild beasts,' the 'satan' and the 'powers and principalities'; the 'prince of light' is pitted against the 'prince of darkness' with man as the battleground. In a sense, both creation and destruction take place within him. In the process the practitioner of solitude may be ground to 'dust and ashes' before he may be said to experience himself as a new creation.

Both Buddha, who seeks solitude through meditation, and Jesus, who seeks solitude through prayer, experience in themselves the full fury of the destructive and creative powers. In the present context, let me concentrate on the latter. Jesus goes up to the mountains to pray; there he is alone; when the evening comes, Jesus's aloneness becomes all the more lonely. But Jesus prays in solitude. Jesus's prayer is not the usual kind of prayer, wherein most of us use God as a partner in conversation. In this type of interlocutory prayer we often use God to cover our solitariness. In it we do not permit solitude to surface and overpower solitariness. This only goes to admit that all prayer has not got the power to transform our solitariness into solitude. Jesus's prayer, on the contrary, aims at reposing in the stillness in order to let the soul its natural solitude. In it there are no words but only 'sighs of soul.' It surely is a higher form of prayer that lets the soul repose in its natural solitude; that lets it merely sigh and groan before God. The prayer of sighs and groans is born out of a solitary encounter with God. Such prayer, being thoroughly interiorized, is capable of being offered anywhere and anytime, provided one has sufficiently developed the spirit of solitude.

Secondly, in solitude, consequent upon the churning of the soul by the destructive and the creative forces, something *happens* to us at the ontic level. Our innermost self, the centre of our being, wherein is buried our solitariness, is laid bare before the divine light ; and is then elevated to the centre of divinity. Man is now totally transparent to the divine presence. He both understands and, what is more, is understood in the divine light. Man's ontic centre is divinely illumined. In other words, the individual human centres are taken into the divine centre. It is soul's 'eternal beatitude,' 'reverse movement to its centre,' *'sākṣātkāra,' 'nirvāṇa.' 'kaivalya'* etc. in the language of the religions.

Finally, in the Christian context, one must not miss an important corollary of the above ontic happening that has a social, more precisely ecclesial, dimension. Having taken the individual human centre into the

divine centre and having divinely illumined it through solitude, to the Christian, it is now made possible to develop meaningfully a (social) communion with the other centres of subjectivity, as dictated by mutual reciprocity. It is true that everyone is solitary and that no one can really penetrate to the innermost centre of other's being. A direct movement here to the other is always fraught with the risk of turning the other into the demonic double, as existential psychoanalysis abundantly bears witness to. For the direct movement is a polar movement of 'from–to' that has its inherent dangers. But there is a movement that is involutional, organic and ever within that, in virtue of its being first taken up into the divine centre, radically transmutes the human being that is originally centred within itself into a being open to other's subjectivity in mutual reciprocity. To be sure, in the latter movement man's solitariness is not destroyed but, having reached the divine centre, is overcome in solitude. Man is now capable of resting in solitude without the fear of being wrenched into the terrors of solitariness. Since lonely men seek and find rest in the divine centre, they are now capable of discovering their common human predicament and its ontic ground. The recognition on the part of man that he is not alone in his solitariness and the search for solitude makes him aware of the need to reach out to the other. But what makes it however possible is not his own but the divine nature.

To the Christian, the foundation of any form of community (social solidarity) is to be located within the heart of the Trinity: To him God is a Trinity of persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They are distinct from each other and yet they co-exist eternally in a relationship of absolute equality and reciprocity. However inadequate the philosophical categories used by the theologians in presenting this trinitarian dogma, in his experience, the Christian did not lose sight of the one fundamental truth: There is not merely the oneness of a divine nature, but within it the full and perfect communion of three divine persons. Here is a mystery that provides the prototype for what society should be, after the heart of the trinitarian God Himself. By affirming personal individuality, after the trinitarian mystery, it should be possible to human beings to live in such communion and collaboration with each other as to constitute a unified society of equals and fellow citizens. Authentic social communion is thus made possible to him in the trinitarian context, for all love, that by its very nature reaches out to the other, has to be reborn in solitude. Thus only in solitude can we reach out to those who are separated from us. It is the presence of the eternal that breaks the walls that separate the temporal from the

temporal. Thus it may be argued that it is solitude, rather than garrulous gregariousness, that brings us closer to those we love. Solitude hence is not other than the presence of the divine in the temporal. In solitude, to be sure, we are alone and yet not lonely, for it is borne on the divine presence. Therefore, being in solitude means being present to the eternal in order to find ourselves and others in Trinity.