overtake the land of hope and glory, directing the pomp and circumstance to themselves. This book, by contrast, proceeds from an ancient Christian view that the foundation of every land is silence (Ws 18:14), where God simply and perpetually gives *Himself*. This Self-gift is manifested in the creation, in the people of God and their inspired (if stumbling) pursuit of a just society, and most fully, in the Christian view of things, in Jesus Christ. This is the homeland to which every spiritual pilgrim is constantly being called, "called home," as St. Augustine says, "from the noise that is around us to the joys that are silent. Why do we rush about . . . looking for God who is here at home with us, if all we want is to be with him?"[8]

This joy that is silent is already within us. Its discovery is precious beyond compare. R. S. Thomas expresses it with deceptive understatement:

> But the silence in the mind
> is when we live best, within
> listening distance of the silence we call God . . .
> It is a presence, then,
> whose margins are our margins; that calls us out over our
> own fathoms.

This silence is all pervading, from the innermost depths of the human being, whose margins are God's margins, to the widest embrace of human compassion. "What to do," asks R. S. Thomas, "but to draw a little nearer to such ubiquity by remaining still?"[9] Let us journey home, then, to the silence of our own fathoms by becoming still.

ONE

Parting the Veil: The Illusion of Separation from God

> If the doors of perception were cleansed
> Everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.
>
> —*William Blake*

Marriage of Heaven and Hell, object 14
17-19 (?) 15

A young prisoner cuts himself with a sharp knife to dull emotional pain. "As long as I can remember," he says, "I have had this hurt inside. I can't get away from it, and sometimes I cut or burn myself so that the pain will be in a different place and on the outside." Acknowledging this to himself, he decided to approach the Prison Phoenix Trust, whose aim is to address the spiritual needs of prisoners by teaching them how to pray, how to turn their prison cells into monastic cells. After learning how to meditate and practicing it twice a day for several weeks, the young prisoner speaks movingly of what he has learnt. "I just want you to know that after only four weeks of meditating half an hour in the morning and at night, the pain is not so bad, and for the first time in my life, I can see a tiny spark of something within myself that I can like."

Another prisoner discovers he is becoming more human and realizes in the process, "All beings, no matter how reactionary, fearful, dangerous or lost, can open themselves to the

sacred within and become free. I have become free even in prison. Prison is the perfect monastery."[1]

The spiritual liberation of which these prisoners speak is not something they acquired. The clear sense of their testimony is that they discovered, rather than acquired, this "sacred within." The distinction between acquisition and discovery may seem like hairsplitting, but it is important to see that what the one prisoner calls the "sacred within" did not come from some place outside him. The contemplative discipline of meditation, what I will call in this book contemplative practice, doesn't acquire anything. In that sense, and an important sense, it is not a technique but a surrendering of deeply imbedded resistances that allows the sacred within gradually to reveal itself as a simple, fundamental fact. Out of this letting go there emerges what St. Paul called our "hidden self": "may he give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong" (Eph 3:16). Again, contemplative practice does not produce this "hidden self" but facilitates the falling away of all that obscures it. This voice of the liberated hidden self, the "sacred within," joins the Psalmist's, "Oh, Lord, you search me and you know me. . . . It was you who created my inmost self. . . . I thank you for the wonder of my being" (Ps 138 (9):1, 13, 14).

Through their experience of interior stillness these prisoners unwittingly have joined a chorus of saints and sages who proclaim by their lives that this God we seek has already found us, already looks out of our own eyes, is already, as St. Augustine famously put it, "closer to me than I am to myself."[2] "O Beauty ever ancient, ever new," he continues, "you were within and I was outside myself."[3]

One of the more provocative books concerning life with God is known as *The Cloud of Unknowing*. It is an anonymous work from the English Middle Ages and its author, likely a Carthusian monk, is simply known as the author of *The Cloud*. In this work, as well as in a companion piece, *The Book of Privy Counselling*, the author of *The Cloud* offers much helpful advice and encouragement to anyone who feels drawn to contemplation. With startling frankness he says, "God is your being, and what you are, you are in God."[4] So as not to cause doctrinal eyebrows to spike he quickly qualifies his statement, "But you are not God's being."[5]

Not only has this God we desire already found us, thus causing our desire, but God has never *not* found us. "It was you who created my inmost self and put me together in my mother's womb. You know me through and through, from having watched my bones take shape when I was being formed in secret" (Ps 139:13–15). "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you" (Jer 1:5). As Creator, God is the ground of who we are.

"God is your being." The author of *The Cloud* is not an isolated voice in this matter. The great Carmelite doctor of the Church, St. John of the Cross, says, "The soul's center is God."[6] God is the ground of the human being. Various Christian traditions may argue over orthodox or heterodox ways of understanding this, but there is clear and authoritative testimony based on living the Christian mysteries that if we are going to speak of what a human being is, we have not said enough until we speak of God. If we are to discover for ourselves who we truly are—that inmost self that is known before it is formed, ever hidden with Christ in God (Ps 139:13; Jer 1:5; Col 3:3)—the discovery is going to be a manifestation of the ineffable mystery of God, though we may feel more and more inclined to say less and less about God. As St. Diadochos of Photiki observed, there are some who are adept

in the spiritual life and "consciously illuminated by spiritual knowledge, yet do not speak about God."[7]

Union with God is not something that needs to be acquired but realized. The reality, which the term "union" points to (along with a host of other metaphors), is already the case. The unfolding in our lives of this fundamental union is what St. John of the Cross called "the union of likeness."[8] It is our journey from image to likeness (Gen 1:26).

Acquisition and its strategies obviously have a role in life. It is important to pursue and acquire good nutrition, reasonable health, a just society, basic self-respect, the material means by which to live, and a host of other things. However, they don't have a real role in the deeper dynamics of life. For example, they play no role in helping us to die or to become aware of God. Dying is all about letting go and letting be, as is the awareness of God.

People who have traveled far along the contemplative path are often aware that the sense of separation from God is itself pasted up out of a mass of thoughts and feelings. When the mind comes into its own stillness and enters the silent land, the sense of separation goes. Union is seen to be the fundamental reality and separateness a highly filtered mental perception. It has nothing whatever to do with the loss of one's ontological status as a creature of God, nothing to do with becoming an amorphous blob. Quite the opposite, it is the realization this side of death of the fundamental mystery of our existence as the creation of a loving God. "Of you my heart has spoken, 'seek His face'" (Ps 27:8). "For God alone my soul in silence waits" (Ps 62:1,6). "God is your being, and what you are you are in God, but you are not God's being."[9] "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."[10]

Once this depth dimension of life emerges, New Testament resonances, especially with John and Paul, reach the whole world (Ps 19:4). John's Gospel is well known for its concern for this divine indwelling. "On that day you will know that I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you" (Jn 14:20). "May they all be one, just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us." (Jn 17:21).

Paul, the author of the oldest New Testament writings we have, is an important witness to this. In the Letter to the Galatians he writes, "I have been Crucified with Christ and yet I am alive; yet it is no longer I, but Christ living in me" (Gal 2:19). Paul looks within and sees not Paul but Christ. Are Paul and Christ two separate things? They are two separate things from the perspective of creation, yes, but from the perspective of the transformation of awareness, no. When Paul looks within and sees Christ, I do not suggest he sees Christ as an object of awareness. Paul speaks of something more direct and immediate, which pertains to the ground of awareness and not to the objects of awareness. The awareness itself is somehow about the presence of Christ in Paul. "I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me." Paul has not used the word "union," but he's getting at the same reality that the language of union attempts to express. Obviously, a CCTV camera watching Paul say all this is going to show the same old Paul. This has to do with the ground of awareness, not what he's *aware of*, but the ground of the *aware-ing* itself. Only when the mind is held by silence does this open field of awareness emerge as the unifying ground of all unities and communities, the ground of all that is, all life, all intelligence.

Whatever this "Christ-living-in-me" is, and it is most assuredly not a particular *thing*, it holds true for each of us. My