

Introduction

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In 1675 the Spanish priest Miguel de Molinos published at the age of forty-seven a concise and simple introduction to the art of interior prayer, or contemplation: the *Spiritual Guide*, “which disentangles the soul and leads it by the interior way to perfect contemplation and the rich treasure of interior peace.”¹ On its first pages it carried the approbation of some of the most notable clerics of various orders, and was an immediate success, passing through several editions in the original Spanish, and being translated into Latin, French, Italian, and English.

For ten years the *Spiritual Guide* was immensely popular, and Molinos himself enjoyed huge popular veneration as a spiritual director and teacher. Twelve years’ residence had made him a Roman citizen, and few would recall his arrival from Valencia at the age of thirty-five as a champion for the canonization of one Francisco Simón, whose case foundered. By this time Molinos had friends in high places, including Pope Innocent XI, who secured apartments for him in the papal palace. Spectacularly, however, ten years following publication of the *Spiritual Guide*, and after a protracted heresy trial, lasting two years, for his alleged illuminist views, he was found guilty on sixty-eight charges, and condemned to life in prison, where he died nine years later.

We do not have a great deal of information regarding Molinos’ beliefs, apart from the *Spiritual Guide* itself, and a second hitherto unpublished book titled the *Defence of Contemplation*, his rebuttal of the charges of heresy. Additionally, there is the Bull *Coelestis Pastor*, which sets out the so-called sixty-eight heretical “propositions”. There is also the Church’s general condemnation of Quietism of which they believed Molinos to have been if not the originator, then a pivotal figure. And of course we have the continued popularity of the *Spiritual Guide* in Protestant circles, for it was here that translations into English, German and Dutch were frequently reprinted long after the text had disappeared from the Roman Catholic world.

There is very little that is exceptionable in the *Spiritual Guide*, for it is simply a short and very readable presentation of traditional mystical teaching, notably that of St Teresa of Ávila and her friend and colleague St

John of the Cross, both of whom wrote at the height of Spain's Golden Age, a century before Molinos. Like these two mystics he also wrote for beginners on the path of interior prayer, as well as describing the higher reaches of mystical contemplation. But what marked out Molinos above all was that he wrote for the ordinary layperson, not exclusively for those in the cloister.

The book begins by distinguishing in terms first set out by Richard of St Victor in the twelfth century the two types of prayer: discursive meditation and interior or silent contemplation. There are many, asserts Molinos, who live in spiritual aridity and discomfort, though ready to advance from discursive, or "active", prayer to a more advanced, "passive" contemplation. There are five signs, says Molinos, by which an experienced director would know when to encourage a person to make the transition from the active mode to the passive: 1) the first and most important, that they can no longer engage in discursive meditation or, if they can, find it upsetting and fatiguing; 2) that although they lack devotion, they seek solitude and avoid the company of others; 3) that they find devotional books disagreeable, for they tell them nothing of the interior peace they possess, though without knowing it; 4) that though they are unable to meditate they are still determined to persevere in prayer; 5) that they recognize higher knowledge and their own confusion, hate sin, and love God (Book 1, chapter 16).

The remedy for these disquieting signs, advises Molinos, is to seek out a competent spiritual director, or 'guru' – harder than it sounds, as St Teresa's biography tells us. She records instances of her own mishandling as a result of the ineptitude of many purporting to be experts, who clearly were not. However, Molinos and his colleagues set a good example, travelling throughout Italy, reviving the practice of contemplation in monasteries and convents, where it had fallen into disuse. Significantly, a body of twelve thousand letters from those spiritually troubled were found in Molinos' possession at the time of his trial.

That Molinos was very perceptive in his advice to beginners in interior prayer is evidenced by many passages in the *Spiritual Guide*. His warning against straining in prayer, for instance, identifies a mistake made by beginners in all kinds of meditation, using "meditation" here in its contemporary sense. For instance, following is the sort of advice given by Dhiravamsa, a Buddhist living here in the West, regarding Vipassana meditation and "mindfulness," which has clear affinities with Molinos' "acquired contemplation" described in the first book of the *Spiritual Guide*:

Watch any state of mind, whether it be worry, anxiety, wandering, thinking, talking – any condition of mind – watch carefully, closely, *without thinking about it*, without trying

to control it and without interpreting any thought; because this is very important when you come to the deeper level of meditation . . . In the deep state, all concepts and all names or words must be given up completely so that the mind can remain silently watchful and because of that, creative energy comes into being. . . You can sense creative energy in the state of passive watchfulness or in the state of stillness and complete tranquillity.²

The keyword to the *Spiritual Guide* is “two”. There are *two* ways of approach to God, *two* sorts of prayer, *two* sorts of devotion, *two* sorts of darkness, *two* sorts of spiritual men, *two* kinds of silence, *two* kinds of penance, *two* sorts of contemplation. On the one hand Molinos accepts the normal “exterior” system taught and practised by the Church, which he gently puts aside, while on the other he puts forward his alternative “interior” system. To bring out the difference between the two ways – the exterior, active way, and the interior, passive way of Quiet – I summarize the distinctions as follows:

1. Approach God:
 - a. By rational thought, by meditation, which is remote – the way of beginners.
 - b. By contemplation, which is by pure faith: detached, pure and interior – the way of proficients.
2. Prayer:
 - a. Is tender and delightful, loving, and full of emotions: the prayer of beginners to *gain* the soul.
 - b. Is dark, dry, desolate – the prayer of proficients to *purify* the soul.
3. Devotion:
 - a. Is “accidental” and sense orientated, tempting to the instincts.
 - b. Devotion is “essential” and true, encouraging virtue.
4. Darkness and Aridity:
 - a. Unhappy, as it arises from wrongdoing, which deprives us of joy.
 - b. Or joyous, for it encourages virtue.
5. Spiritual persons:
 - a. Either outwardly oriented, given to reason and outward observance – the way of beginners, who strive towards a spiritual life, but achieve nothing.
 - b. Or “interior” persons, withdrawn in the presence of God, contemplating him in silence, and in whom he operates.
6. Solitude and Silence:
 - a. Either physical withdrawal from the world in search of peace.

- b. Or devoted to “interior silence” – detached from all things: especially desire and one’s own will – experience of the Void.
- 7. Penance:
 - a. Exterior, undertaken by oneself.
 - b. Interior, submitted to as God’s will.
- 8. Contemplation:
 - a. Imperfect, active, acquired by our own efforts.
 - b. Perfect, infused and passive – truly to live in the Void (described in the third book).

Regrettably, Molinos found that many beginners would not persist long with the practice he taught, since they might well find it dull and apparently unrewarding. At such times he would insist (following St John of the Cross) that despite appearances to the contrary, God was *active* within them, in the darkness. Additionally, he urged people to learn to accept themselves, sin and all, advice that certainly antagonized the Jesuits who encouraged frequent confession, for essentially Molinos’ spirituality called for inner penitence rather than outward austerities, as well as for frequent Communion.

His overall advice, then, was to avoid strain in meditation and contemplation, and neither should people force themselves to attend unrewarding Church services, or to read devotional books, or, when meditating, to struggle against disturbing and distracting thoughts. All of this, of course, was anathema to a more activist Jesuit spirituality, deriving as it did from the Ignatian “exercises,” which were essentially “exterior”, discursive, and imagistic.

Eventually the *Spiritual Guide* was perceived as a threat to the Jesuits’ authority, for they placed strict emphasis on outward observance, and exercised much of their power through the confessional. Consequently they initiated an attack on Molinos and his particular brand of interior spirituality. Initially the attack failed, but eventually a far more serious attack was prepared – a prosecution before the court of the Holy Inquisition on 263 charges of heresy, which were then reduced to 68. The heresy of which Molinos was accused and finally convicted was that of “illuminism”, or Quietism, of which more shortly.

Molinos’ trial was long and squalid, and although at times accusations of heresy seemed unlikely to stick, new charges of sexual misconduct were levelled against him, charges that collapsed at the trial. Eventually he was convicted at the chapel of the Santa Maria Sopra Minerva convent, and on this final day – 21 December 1687 – the Minerva was so full that a crowd gathered in the street outside, made up of those unable to gain entrance. Members of the College of Cardinals, bishops, eminent clerics, the principal ambassadors, all filled the seats as Molinos, on his knees in

the centre of the choir, holding a lighted candle in his manacled hands, read his abjuration and heard his sentence of life imprisonment.

A contemporary English chronicler, Bishop Burnet, wrote: “Molinos’ bearing was not that of one oppressed by the weight of findings against him, nor of one who repents his actions or his heresy. Indeed the mildness of the censure laid upon him who was so little humble or repentant seemed rather due to an insufficiency of proof than to the clemency of the judges.”³ All present testified to his dignified bearing at the trial, and to his air of self-assured equanimity, a self-assured equanimity born out by the remarks made to his gaoler as he was led from the chapel: “We shall know on the Day of Judgement which of us is right, you or I,”⁴ sentiments that are echoed in various pages of the *Spiritual Guide* and the *Defence of Contemplation*, as we see from these lines in the *Spiritual Guide*:

If almighty God has worked so many miracles in the chaos
of the Void, then what will he do for you who are made in his
own image and likeness, if you persevere with courage, quiet
and resigned, and with a true knowledge of your own
nothingness? Happy indeed is the person who though troubled,
afflicted and desolate, remains constant within. . . .

Could this be a self-portrait? Molinos died after nine years’ imprisonment on 21 December 1696, the anniversary of his final appearance in the Minerva, at the age of sixty-eight.

(2)

A sense o’er all my soul impressed
That I am weak, yet not unblessed,
Since in me, round me everywhere,
Eternal strength and wisdom are. . . .

S. T. Coleridge

With Molinos the great tradition of Western mysticism, which had originated with the Victorines, flowered in Germany, England, the Netherlands and, finally, in Spain, came to an end. It is well known that few mystics had felt at ease within the confines of Church doctrine. Meister Eckhart, perhaps the greatest of them all, was fighting a prosecution for heresy when he died. So what is the crux of the quietist conundrum, a conundrum that was so troublesome to clerics and mystics alike, and which culminated in Molinos’ condemnation, the final scene in the drama?

Essentially, the controversy hinges on what we make of Eckhart’s

notion of “detachment” (abgescheidenheit), which Molinos calls the Void (nada). Both these concepts denote an ego-less mode of being in which our normal ego-centredness is suspended to yield a sense of profound peace and well-being. As Eckhart would say, it indicates a sense of “non-being”, which results from our taking up a position within the “Godhead” – the “God beyond Deity”.

Similarly, Molinos talks of the state of union as a dwelling in the “Void”, a state of consciousness also beyond the created ego. Thus the Void is that state experienced when the powers of the soul are gathered into its apex, the point at which it transcends all creatureliness. As such, it is a state of consciousness that undermines the whole principle of the ego, and all that flows from it. Paradoxically, then, it is a state of *nothingness* that is nevertheless a *plenitude*, an *emptiness* that is a *fullness*, a *passivity* that is an *activity*. It is what I refer to as the “dynamic passivity of the Void”, which is the nature of ultimate reality, and in which we participate in the divine union.

The harmony of serenity and power that characterizes ultimate reality – the dynamic passivity of the Void – receives a plain statement in the work of Abhinavagupta, the eleventh-century Hindu exponent of Kashmir Shaivism. In his metaphysical system the masculine Shiva is envisaged in dynamic relation to the feminine Shakti, both of whom are conceived metaphorically as “the Heart”:

The Heart is the very Self of Shiva . . . and of the . . . Goddess who is inseparable from Shiva. Indeed the Heart is the site of their union, of their embrace. . . The Heart is the Ultimate which is both utterly transcendent to and yet totally immanent in all created things. It is the ultimate essence. . . The Heart is the fullness of the unboundedness of Shiva, the plenum of being that overflows continuously into manifestation. . . The Heart of Shiva is not a static or inert absolute, however. . . the non-dual Kashmir Shaiva tradition considers it to be in a state of perpetual movement, a state of vibration in which it is continuously contracting and expanding, opening and closing, trembling, quivering, throbbing, waving, and sparkling. The intensity and speed of this movement is such that paradoxically it is simultaneously a perfect dynamic stillness.⁵

Above all, however, consciousness of the Void is emphatically *not* a negation of the individual will – which is Quietism (or pantheism) – for it is an amalgam of the individual consciousness *and* the universal, of the active *and* the passive, in which the creature most certainly cooperates with the creator. Following is a brief collation of passages

by Meister Eckhart that will serve to illustrate the sort of polarities of which I speak, the most important being the state of *nothingness* (the Void), which is also a *fullness*. Additionally, in these passages the role of the individual will is quite clearly discernible, thus giving the lie to the suggestion that Eckhart – or Molinos – advocated some kind of quietistic inertia. It is clear from what follows that when we set aside our own will, then God becomes active on our behalf:

If therefore the heart is to be in a state of preparedness to receive the All Highest, then it must rest in nothingness, and that offers the greatest of all possibilities. Since the detached heart is at the highest point, then it must rest in nothingness, for that is where the greatest receptivity exists.

When a person takes leave of their ego in obedience, and strips themselves, then God must needs enter into them, for when someone does not want anything for themselves, then God must will for them what he wills for himself.⁶

If it is the case that a man is emptied of things, creatures, himself and God, and if still God could find a place in him to act, then we say: as long as that (place) exists, this man is not poor with the most intimate poverty. For God does not intend that man shall have a place reserved for him to work in, since the true poverty of spirit requires that man shall be emptied of God and all his works, so that if God wants to act in the soul, he must be the place in which he acts – and that he would like to do. For if God once found a person as poor as this, he would take the responsibility of his own action and would himself be the scene of action, for God is one who acts within himself. It is here, in this poverty, that man regains the eternal being that once he was, now is, and evermore shall be.⁷

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People do not need to think so much what they should do, but rather how they should be. If we are good, then our works are radiant. If we are just, then our works also are just. We should not think to found sanctity on doing things, but rather on a way of being, for works do not sanctify us, rather we sanctify works. . . .

Meister Eckhart

The Buddhist philosopher Nishida Kitaro (1870-1945) was one of the leading thinkers of the Kyoto School of Buddhist philosophy. In an article in *Encyclopedia Britannica* we find a clear explanation of

Nishida's thought that endorses the position Eckhart and Molinos set out in relation to detachment, as well as his insistence on the utmost importance of the individual consciousness *within* the universal. It is quite apparent from what follows that what Nishida has in mind with his concept of "absolute nothingness" – in contradistinction to the quietist position – is to accord equal status to the universal *and* the individual, just as all orthodox Christian mystics do, Molinos included:

The "Non-self" of Nishida is the ultimate reality where all subject-object cleavage is overcome. In accordance with Buddhist tradition he called it "Nothingness" and sought to derive the individual reality of everything in the world, whether it be a thing or a self, from the supreme identity of nothingness . . . the "Non-self" of Nishida establishes itself as true individuality in the absolute Nothingness, which includes, not excludes, the individual reality of the thing-in-itself (the ultimate reality of things). . . Nishida thus seeks to clarify the significance of the individual and the universal from the viewpoint of Absolute Nothingness. Thus he propounds that Nothingness. . . is the universal to be sought behind the universal concept and, at the same time, the abyss of Nothingness in which the self as the individual is crystallized.

Now the function of Buddhist yoga – just as it is of Molinos' prayer – is to still the discursive and discriminative functions of the mind to allow it to return to potentiality, so that the world may be perceived once more in all its "suchness", or "nothingness". In this state we are aware again of the joyous and spontaneous play of the Void. In the words of the Buddhist sage Te-Shan, "Only when you have no thing in your mind and no mind in things are you vacant and spiritual, empty and marvellous."⁸ It is this same dynamic passivity of the Void that I have described here in relation to Buddhism that Molinos enjoyed, and which explains much of the meaning and value of his *Spiritual Guide*.

In fact, the compassion that the Zen Buddhists say is contingent upon emptiness (*ku soku jihi*) has its exact counterpart in what Molinos and Christian writers simply called "humility", as we see in these words from Meister Eckhart: "Detachment comes so close to nothingness that there is nothing that can stand between nothingness and it. Therefore, perfect detachment cannot exist without humility."

And from the *Spiritual Guide*:

Those who have attained perfect interior humility don't get anxious about anything because they despise themselves for their failings, ingratitude, and wretchedness, all of which cause them a great

deal of heartache. This is the sign by which you know the sincerely humble of heart. But the happy beings who have such a holy hatred of their own ego live immersed in the depths of the Void from where God raises them up to infuse his divine wisdom, thereby filling them with light, peace, tranquillity, and love.

It should be clear now that authentic spirituality of all times and places has condemned quietistic modes of thought, preferring rather to give equal emphasis to the individual *and* the universal, the active *and* the passive. I conclude now by quoting firstly a description of the Taoist *wu-wei*, expressing so succinctly as it does the principle of “dynamic passivity”. Finally, I give two brief excerpts from the *Spiritual Guide* itself, which in theological language typical of the West speaks of the same creative passivity denoted by *wu-wei*. First, here is J.C. Cooper describing the Taoist principle of *wu-wei* (dynamic passivity):

It is the doctrine of inaction or non-action, but only a superficial outlook interprets it as laissez-faire, in the sense of indifference, for the Taoist is not indifferent. . . . If any translation should be attempted, possibly “non-interference,” or “letting-go” is the best At the higher level it is the desirelessness, the dispassionateness which leads to the release from tensions. . . . Action is normally the outcome of the incessant, and usually feverish, working of the mind. . . . *wu-wei* is the “actionless activity”. . . . *Wu-wei* is not the end of all action but the cessation of motivated action. . . . Actionlessness is an inward quality; it may be passive but it is a creative passivity.⁹

And now Miguel de Molinos:

The means to arrive at this exalted state of renewal, and the most immediate way to be united to the Highest Good, to your primordial origin and supreme peace, is the Void. Endeavour always to be immersed in this Void of your nothingness, for it’s God’s way of working miracles in your soul. Clothe yourself in this Void and strive for it to be your constant support and dwelling place, until you lose yourself in it, and I assure you that if you’re always in the Void, then God will be fully in your soul.

Oh, how blessed are those who are dead and annihilated in this way! For now they live not for themselves, but God lives in them. And in all truth we can say that they’re like the phoenix, because they’re reborn, changed, spiritualized, transformed, and deified.

Notes

1. Although the *Spiritual Guide* was translated into English at the end of the seventeenth century, it was this truncated version that was reprinted in this country up to and including the twentieth century (reprinted in 1907 and 1911, edited by Kathleen Lyttelton, with an introduction by H. Scott Holland). The present version is the first full, modern translation and is based on the *princeps romana* published by Barral in Barcelona in 1974, edited with an introduction by the Spanish poet, José Ángel Valente. I am indebted to Paul Burns of Burns and Oates for his careful editing of my own translation. I am also indebted to the late J.M Cohen whose *Common Experience* (a) first stimulated my interest in Miguel de Molinos, and whose article "Some Reflections on the Life and Work of Miguel de Molinos" (b) was of help to me in this introduction.
 - a. J.M Cohen and J-F Phipps, *The Common Experience*, London, 1979.
 - b. *Studies in Mystical Literature*, Volume 1, Number 3, Spring 1981 (published by the English Department of Tunghai University, Taichung, Taiwan).
2. Dhiravamsa, in *Modern Mystics and Sages* by Anne Bancroft, London, 1978, pp. 146-7.
3. Dr. G Burnet, "A Letter Writ from Rome to One in Holland concerning the Quietists," written in the year 1687.
4. Ibid.
5. P.E. Muller, *The Triadic Heart of Shiva: Kaula Tantricism of Abhinavagupta in the Non-Dual Shaivism of Kashmir*, New York, 1989.
6. These extracts from Oliver Davies, *God Within*, London, 1988, pp. 59-65.
7. Meister Eckhart, in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* by T. Merton, New York, 1968, p. 110.
8. Te-Shen in *The Way of Zen* by Alan W. Watts, Harmondsworth, 1962, p. 151.
9. J. C. Cooper, *Yin and Yang: The Taoist Harmony of Opposites*, Wellingborough, 1982, p. 61.