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Angelus Silesius, 1624–1677 A Bridge Between East and West?

FREDERICK FRANCK

Bottomless well
from which all rises, grows,
and boundless ocean
back into which it flows.

Angelus Silesius.

While browsing in a second-hand bookshop in Copenhagen during a stop-over on a recent trip to Japan, I rediscovered a little book: "Der Cherubinische Wandersmann" ("The Cherubic Wanderer"), by the 17th Century mystical poet Angelus Silesius, who lived in a century of religious conflict, of upheavals, wars and revolutions, almost as troubled as ours.

I had last seen the book long ago as a medical student in my native Holland. It had then made an impression on me. Some stanzas I still recalled vaguely.

I was God inside God
Before I became Me
I shall be God again
Once from that Me set free.

and:

He who turns the senses
to the Light that is his center,
hears what no ear can hear,
sees where no light can enter.

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That night in my Copenhagen hotel room Angelus Silesius's verses opened up in their full and rather awesome profundity, these three hundred short, deceptively naive, mystical rhymes, written by a man who died three hundred years ago, in four days and nights of illumination—in direct confrontation with That which he addressed as God.

While reading, it was as if the ancient Zen masters—for so many years my companions and friends—stood over me, whispering their own commentaries into my ear.

It was more than a fascinating "spiritual divertissement": I began to feel that these rhymes constituted a rare bridge between Eastern and Western spirituality. Then and there I began to translate Angelus Silesius into English:

Who is as were he not,
was never born, had never grown,
had, deepest bliss,
become what God is:
all alone.

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Do not compute eternity
as light-year after year.
One step across
that line called Time—
eternity is here.

It is only fair to post a few warnings. First of all: I am not a scholar. I am an artist. All I really know in my bones I have experienced in a discipline I call Seeing/Drawing.¹ It is my way of mediation, my yoga, my zazen. Seeing/Drawing has been the discipline which brings me into intimate, living contact with the world around me, and through it with myself. Hui-neng (637-715) says: "The Truth is not seen into by sitting in silent meditation." Another Master, Daie, assures us that "Zen practiced in a state of activity is far superior to that practiced in quietude." When I stumbled on "Seeing/Drawing," these words came to me as a reassurance . . .

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The meditations accompanying my translation of Angelus Silesius's verses then,

¹ Frederick Franck "The Zen of Seeing, Seeing/Drawing as Meditation," New York, 1973.

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were the simple drawings of grasses, leaves and plants, done in the touchingly simple garden of biblical flora I found—an oasis in a pitiful neighborhood of New York—behind the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

The longest way to God, the indirect
goes through the intellect.
The shortest way goes through the heart
here the Way's end
and here its start.

The poet Angelus Silesius was born in 1624, the son of Stanislaus Scheffler, a well-to-do Lutheran who had emigrated from Poland, where Protestants were under strong Catholic pressure. Ereslau, capital of Silesia was solidly Lutheran. Stanislaus at age 62, started his new life there by marrying a girl forty years younger than he. They had three children of whom Johannes was the first. The father died at age seventy-five and his young wife followed him two years later, when Johannes was fourteen. He graduated in 1643 from Elizabeth Gymnasium and traveled across a Germany, torn by the Thirty Years War, to the University of Strassbourg. Here he enrolled as a medical student, but soon he transferred to Leyden, in Holland, one of Europe's oldest universities.

Seventeenth century Holland was an island of tolerance in the ocean of religious prejudice and persecution of post-Reformation Europe. At Leyden young Scheffler became involved with an inter-denominational circle of mystics, and met the much older Silesian nobleman Von Frankenberg, who had brought the manuscript of "the inspired shoemaker," Jakob Boehme, from Görlitz to Holland, where it could be printed. Frankenberg became Scheffler's intimate friend and mentor. From tolerant, yet Calvinistic and Puritan Holland, he moved to the University of Padua, plunging into the sensuous Italian atmosphere of emotional Catholic devotions, processions and colorful ceremonial. He received his M.D. from Padua and returned to Silesia. Through family connections he became, at age 23, a court-physician to the Duke of Öls. On a nearby estate his friend Von Frankenberg lived in seclusion, meditation and study. It was he who initiated young Scheffler into the writings of the great European mystics, especially the world of the great theosophist Boehme.

When Von Frankenberg suddenly died in 1652, Scheffler became a lonely man, who felt isolated in the narrowly Lutheran provincial town of Öls. He only found some understanding among Catholics, especially the Jesuits, who had been sent into Silesia as missionaries, to achieve by peaceful means what the

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Thirty Years War had succeeded to achieve in Moravia and Bohemia: the extinction of Protestantism.

These Jesuit missionaries were glad to welcome the prominent physician-poet with his mystical gifts, his perception of transiency, his Saint Francis-like tenderness for the animal world, as their friend and ally:

How short our span!
If we once realized how brief,
we would abstain
from causing any man or beast
the slightest pain, the smallest grief.

Scheffler's friendship with the hated Jesuits made him an object of persecution and soon, also in 1652, he lost his position at court. A few months later, he became a Catholic. He felt himself as reborn and assumed a new name, Angelus Silesius: "God's Silesian messenger." Having become the target of bitter and hateful denunciations on the part of the Lutheran clergy, he unfortunately became enmeshed in constant disputes and controversies which eroded his extraordinary spiritual gifts. After "The Cherubinic Messenger" he continued to write, but never recovered the heights of inspiration which earned this book its place in mystical literature.

The moment that you pause
to rest upon the Way,
you fall behind
you are pulled back
you go astray.

No other details are known of the prolonged and intense enlightenment experience which resulted in "The Cherubinic Wanderer" than what these stanzas themselves reveal in such intensity and authenticity: they may well contain the most direct, articulate and accessible record of mystical experience any Westerner has bequeathed us with:

Behind a thousand
steel bars
shackle me,
yet I shall be unbound,
for I am free.

Whether "The Cherubinic Wanderer" is great poetry or not is for the experts

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to judge. Angelus Silesius himself modestly speaks of "rhymes." But then, it is not a book one reads primarily as poetry, but as a rare opportunity to meet a mystic exceptionally articulate in expressing the depth of his experience with such simplicity, force and directness that the dichotomy between his Christian God-language and the God-free language of the Buddhist contemplatives becomes unimportant, and can almost be forgotten:

To see the Light at all
I must first leap
across all barriers
destroy the Me's defenses,
tear down its wall.

Although many of us have become allergic to a God-language—all too often mouthed mechanically for motives of indoctrination and manipulation—Angelus Silesius can use it without estranging us: When he speaks of God, he does so from a level and an intensity of awareness, and in a tone of voice that one may take seriously:

The Abyss of my heart
cries out incessantly
to the Divine Abyss—
which of the two
the deeper is?

The poet obviously parrots no one. He has experienced what he speaks of. His God, although addressed as a Person, seems to be no other than That which seers have spoken of as the Groundless Ground, or Ultimate Reality, or the Immutable Law that governs all things and beings, and is to be found reflected in the depths of the human heart. Sometimes I was tempted to translate "God" as Dharmakaya, other times as Sambhogakaya . . .

Angelus Silesius, the Christian—be it an unconventional one—mentions God, love, sin, prayer, heavenly bliss in every breath. To the Zen-man these words mean little or nothing. But when he talks about human fate and foibles and of his first-hand experience of what lies beyond, when he speaks of ego and what lies beyond ego, he is a radical whose God is Unknowable Mystery, Nothingness, Abyss, and the Zen master would understand perfectly:

Neither God nor His creatures

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disturb your meditation,
but your own wandering mind
in its vain agitation.

The Silesian mystic had stood "in God's presence" during his four days of illumination. The Zen masters had simply stood in the Presence, in the Present, in the Now/Here. Both must speak of their most momentous experience, as if to tell us:

Trust your deepest intuitions! You are not alone!
You are not mad! You are not losing your way!
You are on your Way! You are your Way!

Both share a disdain of abstract language and metaphysical concepts. They simply speak of what they have experienced and they do this with directness and in few words. Both use paradoxes that shock the mind out of its safe logical rut, paradoxes that, for a change, force logic to be the servant rather than the master of experience, and that prod the mind to overcome contradictions and dualities.

Both speak person-to-person, not to an illusory audience, for they know that only here and there a human heart may respond.

The rose
that with my mortal eye
I see
flowers in God
for all eternity.

Of course each speaks the language of his time and culture. Angelus Silesius could not help being as conditioned by the language of the Gospel and of the mystics who preceded him: Eckhart, Tauler, Ruysbroeck, Boehme, as Zen poets and sages are by that of the sutras and of Hui-neng, Rinzai, Dōgen. But both are driven to communicate, to transmit—however imperfectly—That which they have intuited. Here imperfection becomes perfection: to express the Inexpressible for the benefit of others is highest human challenge. The awakened spirit has only one desire left: to share the Bread of Life it has found, with those who are still seeking and hungry, but who are no longer "others." To be "neither I nor other" seems to be the revelation shared by all who have transcended the bonds of ego, East or West.

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Angelus must have realized within himself that hidden incorruptible core, concealed by layers of confusion, delusion and neurosis which constitutes the True Man, our truly HUMAN Nature, das "Unzerstörbare," as another Westerner, Franz Kafka later called it. It is of this that the Zen masters speak in such a variety of terms: The Self, Bodhi, Suchness, Self-Nature, Buddha-Nature, the Original Face, the Essence of Mind, the Unborn, the True-Man-without-Label-in-this-Mass-of-Red-Flesh:

The True Self is Absolute,
eternal
remains unchanged
through all that is external.

On the flyleaf of a book, I find, dated 1955, scribbled in the lobby of a European luxury hotel, while waiting for a personage, who at that moment seemed important enough to wait for:

Thus I walk, naked in my clothes, within my skin.
That which looks through these eyes and watches
is from eternity to eternity
watching itself motionlessly going through the motions.

While working on the translation of Angelus Silesius's stanzas, I began to see in these little poems ever more clearly a bridge across the chasm which separates Eastern and Western spirituality, a chasm of our own making.

In each of us lives this "East" as well as this "West," just as in each of us lives both a man and a woman. Men who repress their female side, women who deny their masculine traits mutilate themselves, stunt their growth to fully humanity.

By denying our "East" we have become like machines with overdeveloped computer brains. Denying their "West" some Eastern societies have stagnated.

At last many in the West begin to feel that we must turn inward, and are driven to recover our full humanity and its meaning. It is revealing that, turning East, so many discover Upanishads and Sutras to be more compatible, relevant and accessible, than the Scriptures of their own Western Culture. The detour via the East has become indispensable in our search for home.

An Angelus Silesius who can write:

To see God reflected in all that is
both now and here,

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my heart must be a mirror
empty, bright and clear.

is at the very least a signpost toward Hakuin's insight into the "Sun of the Great Mirror Wisdom."

The men we label as "mystics", one may be sure, never considered themselves as anything but realists. They had seen Reality, had been in living contact with it. To them, the merciless "naive realism" of political and "practical" men, their knowhow without wisdom, had revealed itself as a dangerous, thoroughly non-realistic conceit, leading to constantly false appraisals of situations and relationships, habitually missing its targets and causing endless chains of catastrophe. Beyond this naive realism the "mystics" attained the radical realism of the awakened spirit. Both in East and West they realized "das Unzerstörbare," the realization of which reveals the True Man, regardless of all differences in language and symbol systems. These "radical realists" are the bridges across the imaginary chasm. Eckhart, Spinoza and others have fulfilled this crucial function. But, I believe, no one has done so with the directness and simplicity of the childlike rhymester of Öls:

I know not who I am,
but what I know I'm not:
a thing—yet a no-thing
a circle yet a dot.

A ruby is not lovelier
than a rock
an angel not more glorious
than a frog.

Christian mystics have been handicapped by their compulsive conceptualizations of God as an objectified Supreme Being. Even when "in union with God" the Christian mystic automatically excludes what is "not-God." The dichotomies being/non-being, life/death, oneness/manyness, God/man remain. For Zen the endpoint of man's journey is to see that there has never been a separation. Angelus Silesius seems to have had such flashes of insight:

Nothingness thou art
fathomless Abyss—

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to see Abyss in all that is
is seeing that which Is.

We keep so busy talking
we are so keen to act
that we forget
that in the heart
lies all we need
untapped, intact.

It is remarkable how among Western writers only the most radical mystics have been able to overcome their dualistic handicaps. To give a few examples: *Albert Schweitzer* wrote:

“Mysticism is found wherever a human being sees the separation between the natural and the supernatural, between the temporal and the eternal as overcome, and although still being in the temporal and in the mundane, experiences himself as already belonging to the eternal and the supermundane.” Would not Zen retort that the natural IS supernatural, that time IS eternity, that the mundane IS supermundane?

Thomas Aquinas says:

“Since God is the universal cause of all Beings, in whatever region Being can be found, there must be the divine presence.”

I wonder whether a Zen master might not answer by being silent, while scratching his left ear with his right hand.

Meister Eckhart:

“God is nearer to me than I am myself. It is just like wood and stone, but they do not know it.”

The Zen sage might immediately share a cup of tea with him.

Jakob Boehme said:

“Paradise is still in the world, but man is not in paradise unless he is born again. Then he tastes here and now the eternal life for which he was made.” I imagine that the Master would not allow him to finish, but cover the “inspired shoemakers’ ” mouth before he had reached the first comma . . .

It is often said that the problem of the Self was never faced by Christianity as the Buddha faced it so squarely and solved it so thoroughly some twenty five centuries ago. Indeed, the problem of the ego has been neglected by Christian

theology and hermeneutics. But the Gospels themselves, especially that of St. John, speak of the "light that lighteth every man come into the world," of the "Inner Light," "Indwelling Spirit," of "the Kingdom within." The life and death of Christ can be read as the paradigm of egolessness, the overcoming of Ego. Could he not be seen as the Master who summons man to penetrate to the True Self? Could the Sermon on the Mount not be read—instead of as a code of ethics far beyond the reach of man living in the condition of *avidya*—as the revelation of the "ethics of Enlightenment" or rather: the behavior patterns of the Enlightened man?

"The wisdom of the past, present and future Buddhas, as well as of all the Scriptures is in our mind. But in case we fail to enlighten ourselves we have to seek the guidance of the learned and pious ones. On the other hand, those who enlighten themselves need no outside help. It is wrong to insist that without the advice of the learned and pious we cannot attain liberation, because it is by our innate wisdom that we enlighten ourselves," says Hui-neng.

Experience has taught me to put enormous trust in Hui-neng. While working on the translation of Angelus Silesius's stanzas I was increasingly touched by finding confirmation of "the Buddha Nature being equally present in people from North and South of the river"—or rather: from East and West of the Great Divide.

It was as if Angelus Silesius had invented his own Western form of haiku and *dōka*, to express his realizations. His verses are hardly longer than those of Ikkyū:

How this heart no larger than my hand
can enfold heaven, hell and this wide earth.
This is the mystery no man will ever understand.

or

Unless you find paradise
at your own center
there is not the smallest chance
that you may enter.

In many of Angelus's best stanzas dualism seems so completely overcome that I do not hesitate to present him as a 17th century European Zen poet. Where he speaks of God as Nothingness, as Abyss, he reminds one strongly of the Maha-

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yana Masters alluding to Sunyata. Listening to some of these stanzas with the third ear, his "Nothingness" is indeed that "Nothing from which God Himself emerged," but which his language lacked the tools to express.

In those verses he seems to have drunk at the Source, "before—as D. T. Suzuki used to say—God had spoken the fateful 'Let there be light'":

At the Spring
the living water is clear and pure—
unless you drink it there
confusion will endure.
and
Eternal Spirit
becoming all the eye perceives—
formless, nameless mystery
that no mere human mind perceives.

If this is acceptable as authentically Christian—and there is no doubt Angelus Silesius considered himself a committed Christian—one wonders whether the contrasts between Mahayana and Christianity are as shrill as they are made out to be, or whether they might not be seen as complementary by a more profoundly experiential hermeneutics. If it is not acceptable, Angelus Silesius at his best could be considered a meta-Christian, even a Mahayana-Christian:

God the Formless
makes Himself as Form,
becoming structure, substance
lightness, darkness,
stillness, storm.

If further commentary is needed:

Who is God? No one can tell
He is not dark of night
nor light of day
He is not One nor Many
nor "Father" as some say.
Nor is He wisdom, intellect or even mercy—
He is not Being, nor non-Being, neither thing nor
no-thing;

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Perhaps He is what I and all that ever did or will have
being
could ever be capable of seeing
before becoming what He is.

And if one should still be estranged by traces of anthropomorphism or even anthropocentrism:

What is it not to sin?
I did not ever know
until, one day,
my eye could really see
a flower grow.
and
See what no eye can see
go where no foot can go
choose that which is no choice
then you may hear what makes no sound—
God's voice.

The foregoing is no plea for syncretism—although I believe that there are worse things to shudder at than certain somewhat “syncretistic” techniques, almost indispensable if we want to communicate. It need not be repeated here that the religions were born in very different cultural climates and that hence each speaks in its own language of man's irrepressible concern with Ultimate Meaning and each one points in its own way to the overcoming of the separate, empirical ego as pre-condition for the perception of this Meaning. As we are becoming less and less determined by cultural demarcation lines and the world is fast becoming a single spiritual continent, perception of parallels, convergences and equivalents in religious phenomena has become inescapable.

Symbols and concepts which for centuries clashed in the brain, are perceived to fuse quite naturally in the much more clairvoyant heart. We find our spiritual home where the heart is . . .

What Hui-hai had to say in the 9th century is more than ever—and in a wider sense—valid today:

When asked: “Do Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism really amount to three teachings or to one?” he answered: “As understood by men of great understanding they are the same. For men of mediocre understanding they

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differ. All of them spring from the functioning of the same Self-Nature. It is views involving differentiation that make them three. Whether a man gains Illumination or remains deluded, depends on himself, not on differences and similarities in doctrine.”

But to let Angelus Silesius have the last word:

In God all things are one
he does not separate—
with me as with a gnat
does He communicate.

What can you still desire,
except in ignorance
you who contain the universe
in all magnificence.

When tempted to explain
the Absolute
we must at once fall silent
still and mute.