

Spiritual Space

“Understand that you are another world in miniature and that there is within you the sun, the moon, and the stars.”

Years ago I came across this quote from a great Church Father named Origen and it got me to thinking about “spiritual space.” We know that when we look up through a telescope the universe expands before us into immense space populated by stars and galaxies of staggering size. Likewise, when we look down through a microscope, a whole miniature “universe” expands before us, every bit as vast as the universe above in proportion to the size of its tiny objects hidden from the unaided eye, let alone atomic structures that even the most sensitive instruments cannot scope out. Imagine an hourglass and we at the narrow channel in the middle where the sand passes through. Above us the universe expands like a cone. Beneath us the huge world of the small expands out like a cone.

Now if I understand Origen’s quote above aright, we are challenged to think of another expanding cone, one that is within us comprised of “spiritual space.” This space corresponds to the magnitude of the starry sky above and the atomic world beneath. True, it is hard to conceive of something like this within us; we tend to walk around with a vague sense that we have a spirit inside somewhere, but unaware of the immensity of the spiritual space within. Actually, this knowledge of spiritual space is an old one. Origen lived in the second Century A.D., and this knowledge was common among believers in the high Middle Ages, especially among the 13th Century cathedral builders. As they built their immense churches with high vaulted ceilings, flooded with light of many colors, they were aware that they were building a sanctuary within their interior spiritual space for God to dwell in.

This idea, of course, comes from the Bible itself where it is said that we are the temple of God. For most of us in our time we think of a temple being merely a building where we come to worship. Actually, in the ancient world, the temple was a cosmic idea. When the ancients thought of a temple, they considered it a representation of the universe in miniature. For

instance, the “bronze Sea” containing water for ritual cleansing in Solomon’s temple is called a “sea” because it represents the watery deep upon which God founded the earth. The free standing pillars at the entrance, named Yakin (He will establish) and Boaz (in strength), represent the mountains, the pillars upon which the sky rests. The “mercy seat” in the Most Holy place is the very point where God, who is beyond all creation, actually touches this created world. The Temple was the center of the earth, but also the world as it should be, rightly ordered.

Moreover, Jesus Himself tells us that the kingdom of God is “within.” Unless we are willing to dismiss this as a mere symbol, at best a thought provoking idea, we have to understand this in terms of real, spiritual space. A kingdom is vast and glorious; it demands to be understood in terms of space. There must be something large enough within to contain God; God is not cramped in close quarters.

When we become aware of this truth about ourselves, that within us is a vast interior space, a universe in miniature, a cathedral for God to dwell in, then it helps us to conceptualize the interior life God invites for us to live. It becomes a place which prayer opens up for us. We can comprehend the importance of the holy life; it has more to do with creating interior splendor suitable for God than merely being a good person. The next time you enter our church and see the sunlit sanctuary open up before you with the marble altar and the stain glass window of Christ the King above, be assured that you are looking at a replica of your own soul.ⁱ

ⁱ The Origen quote is from *The Fathers of the Church: Origen, Homilies on Leviticus* (The Catholic University of America Press: Washington, D.C., 1990), p. 92.