

Contemplative Prayer:

A Brief Introduction

By Rod Whitacre

For God alone my soul in silence waits...
(*Psalm 62.1*)

FOR a number of years a group of students, faculty and staff at Trinity School for Ministry have met weekly to practice contemplative forms of prayer. In this brief article I will introduce both the Contemplative Prayer Group and some basics of contemplative prayer itself. If you haven't experienced this type of prayer, these notes may help you try it out. Such prayer takes a variety of forms, but none of them has very many moving parts, as it were.

What we do at contemplative prayer meetings

We gather to discuss and practice forms of prayer that are characterized by silence. We begin with discussion of such prayer and then move to prayer itself. A brief prayer is offered to help us collect our thoughts and turn to the Lord, then a brief passage of Scripture is read. This reading of Scripture puts our silence in the context of God's Word. After the reading we are silent for about 20 minutes, and then we pray the Lord's Prayer. After the session is over people sometimes remain for a few minutes for further reflection and discussion.

Different forms of prayer

During the time of silence the individuals who have gathered together are practicing various forms of non-vocal prayer. For some it is a time of meditation on a text from the Scriptures, either the one just read or another. They may visualize a scene and then dialogue with the Lord regarding its details. Or they may take a word or phrase from Scripture and repeat it, reflecting on its meaning before the Lord and discussing it with Him. Others use a simpler form of meditation, perhaps focusing on one of the Lord's attributes, rejoicing that He is Savior, or Shepherd, or Light, or some other similar truth. Those who use more specifically contemplative forms of prayer simply seek to be attentive to the Presence of the Lord and receptive to Him. Rather than speaking to God or listening to Him through meditative reflection, for them this period of prayer is for contact with God on a level deeper than the mind. They use the mind to be still before the Lord and wait upon Him in their heart.

Certainly, we need to study the Scriptures and the Faith, and in the light of this study, along with meditative reading, we need to reflect on the images of Scripture and the truths of the Faith. As we fill our mind with these images, stories, and truths they guide and shape our lives under the influence of the Holy Spirit. But we also need contemplative silence before God, and it is with this sort of prayer that I am concerned in this booklet. Accordingly, although people who attend our Contemplative Prayer Group are free to practice forms of prayer in which their minds are active if they so desire, I will focus here on some of the more contemplative forms.

Parenthetically, I should mention that the terms meditation and contemplation are not always used in the ways I am using them, so the terms can get confusing as you read in the literature on these forms of prayer. Some use "meditation" to refer to all of the forms of prayer I've just mentioned, while others use it to refer to the specific practice of repeating a word or phrase. To add to the confusion, for some writers the term "contemplative prayer" refers to a profound union with God on a level which few people ever experience. On this latter definition, the forms I will be describing are not "contemplative prayer" itself, but rather a preparation for it.

Basics of contemplative prayer

A prayer of silence is grounded in the conviction that God is present and invites us to be in relation with Himself. We do not need to try to get God's attention, nor plead with Him to love us. Rather, by faith we accept that He desires us, and we yield to Him in love, opening ourselves to His Presence and waiting upon Him. Christ stands at the door of our heart knocking, and the prayer of silence is an invitation for Him to enter, and to say and do what He wants, specifically on the level of the heart. The heart is the very center of our being, deeper than our thinking self and our feeling self, but incorporating these faculties. So in a prayer of silence we step back from our thoughts and feelings and onto the level of simple awareness, and we focus that awareness on God's Presence.

In order to pray in this way some people use a particular word which embodies for them the intention of attending to the Presence. Others use a visual image for the same purpose. Others use a sensation of the body, usually either the beating of their heart or the flow of their breath. When thoughts or feelings arise, they gently bring their attention back to God and His Presence by returning to the word or image or sensation.

It is usually best to set a specific period of time for such prayer. Many writers suggest 20 minutes as a good length, though you might begin with a shorter period and work up to this length or beyond. Before beginning you should find a bodily position, whether sitting, standing, lying down, or walking, that enables you to be comfortable, relaxed, alert and stable. After praying briefly for God's blessing simply begin to focus on God's Presence and yield to Him, using whatever image or word best expresses this intention. When you notice that your attention has drifted to some thought or emotion or sensation, simply return to the focus word or image as a way of returning your attention to God. When the prayer time is over, remain quiet for a moment, perhaps praying the Lord's Prayer or some other prayer.

Two approaches to contemplative prayer

Among the more contemplative forms of prayer which simply attend to God's Presence, some seek to set aside all thoughts, even thoughts of God, and simply attend to His Presence as such, while others focus on God as He is revealed in Jesus.

The first of these approaches has been represented in recent times by the writings of Fr. John Main and Fr. Thomas Keating, among others. While Fr. Main was serving in the British Colonial Service in Malaya, he was taught to pray by a Hindu monk. When Main became a Benedictine monk he was told to stop using a prayer word, a mantra, since such prayer was not part of the Christian tradition. He obeyed, but then later, while reading the teachings and practices of the Desert Fathers and Mothers as described by St. John Cassian in his *Conferences*, written in the fifth century, Main discovered that the use of a mantra was indeed a part of the Church's tradition. So this form of prayer again became a central part of his own experience and the focus of his ministry. In 1975 Main started a Christian Meditation Centre in Montreal, and he oversaw an increasing number of such centers until his death in 1982. This work continues through the World Community for Christian Meditation.

In the 1970's Fr. Keating was Abbot of St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, a Trappist monastery. He noticed that a number of young people visiting the monastery were looking to the non-Christian Eastern religions for a vital contact with God through contemplative forms of prayer. Keating, along with two of his monks, Fr.

William Meninger and Fr. Basil Pennington, developed Centering Prayer as a way of helping people reappropriate the contemplative element within Christianity. As with Main, they found this element within the Desert Fathers and Mothers, but also of particular importance for them were the fourteenth century document *The Cloud of Unknowing* and the works of the later Spanish mystics, St. John of the Cross and St. Theresa of Avila. Keating continues to speak and write, and the work is now furthered by Contemplative Outreach, Ltd.

Both Main and Keating make clear that in such prayer we are praying in and through Christ and the Spirit. Their instructions differ from one another in that Main says one should repeat the prayer word throughout the time of prayer, while Keating says one need only repeat the word as a way to recall our attention to God when it has wandered. But for both of them the focus word should have no meaning in itself other than as an expression of our intent to be present to God with our whole being, consenting to His Presence and work in our lives. The point is to make contact with God in the heart, which is deeper than the thinking self. So for this time of prayer we do not try to think about God, but rather we use our thinking self to keep our attention turned to God, opening to Him through focus on the prayer word. We do not make the mind go blank, but rather give it a task to do that brings it to stillness, helping us be open to God Himself, not just thoughts about Him. Accordingly, it is a prayer of great simplicity and humility.

Turning now to the second approach to contemplative prayer, we find a major representative in the Jesus Prayer, a significant influence in Eastern Orthodoxy going back many centuries. In this approach the word represents more than our intent. Indeed, in the Jesus Prayer the name of Jesus is used precisely because it is full of significance. This prayer draws upon the ancient notion, found in the Bible as well as elsewhere, that the name of God is itself powerful. The most recent and authoritative lexicon for the Greek New Testament offers the following succinct explanation in the article on *onoma*, the Greek word for “name.”

The belief in the efficacy of the name is extremely old; its origin goes back to the most ancient times and the most primitive forms of intellectual and religious life. It has exhibited an extraordinary vitality. The period of our literature also sees—within as well as without the new community of believers—in the name something real, a piece of the very nature of the personality whom it designates, expressing the person’s qualities and powers.... The Judeo-Christians revere and use the name of God and, of course, the name of Jesus.

(F. W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third ed., p. 712)

After citing a number of New Testament passages, Danker continues, “Although in the preceding examples the name is often practically inseparable from the being that bears it, this is perhaps even more true of the following cases, in which the name appears almost as the representation of the Godhead, as a tangible manifestation of the divine nature” (*ibid.*).

In keeping with such ideas, the Jesus Prayer treats the name of Jesus as a very real way of making contact with the Lord Himself. But it has this power only when said with love and attention—a mere mechanical repetition is not of value, and there is no place for

notions of magic. And while the name is a point of contact with Jesus, the Jesus Prayer is not focused on having thoughts or emotions about Jesus. As with the first approach to contemplative prayer, this is a prayer of the heart that goes deeper than thought, emotion, or volition.

Some people repeat the words of the Jesus Prayer throughout the period of time set apart for the prayer. It is helpful to focus the attention on the mental sound of each word, saying each word inwardly with care. This focus on the sound of the words makes their meaning present in a very simple way, without the mind getting distracted in analysis or reflection. When the mind is particularly agitated then the careful attention to each word, repeating a given word until it has been said with attention, can help the mind slow down and concentrate. The words can then be said with attention, in a calm and even pattern.

Other people repeat the words only as needed in order to remain alert and attentive. This alternation between the repetition of the name of Jesus and silence is described beautifully by A Monk of the Eastern Church.

Even in the act of invocation of the name, its literal repetition ought not to be continuous. The Name pronounced may be extended and prolonged in seconds or minutes of silent rest and attention. The repetition of the Name may be likened to the beating of wings by which a bird rises into the air. It must never be laboured and forced, or hurried, or in the nature of a flapping. It must be gentle, easy, and—let us give to this word its deepest meaning—graceful. When the bird has reached the desired height it glides in its flight, and only beats its wing from time to time in order to stay in the air. So the soul, having attained to the thought of Jesus and filled herself with the memory of him may discontinue the repetition of the Name and rest in our Lord. The repetition will only be resumed when other thoughts threaten to crowd out the thought of Jesus. Then the invocation will start again in order to gain fresh impetus.

(A Monk of the Eastern Church [Fr. Lev Gillet], *On the Invocation of the Name of Jesus* [London: The Fellowship of St. Alban and St Sergius, 1946], p. 3)

We see, then, that there are two major approaches to contemplative prayer. One approach uses a word or image solely as a reminder of God's Presence, and the other focuses on the name of Jesus as full of significance and as itself mediating His Presence. But the main point of both forms is the same, namely, to be consciously in contact with the living Presence of the Living Lord and to yield to Him in love.

The heart

Both approaches to contemplative prayer assume a common understanding of the heart that is different from the view most people in modern western cultures have of the heart. The heart is not simply our emotions, nor is it our rational thought. It is a deeper place at our core that incorporates our rational, intuitive, emotional and volitional powers, but is also deeper than any of them. The heart is the meeting point between the seen and the unseen.

Many people identify their inner life with their thoughts or emotions and don't realize there is a deeper aspect to themselves. Certainly, the thoughts and the emotions are

wonderful gifts from God and play crucial roles in our lives. Indeed, it is through them that we have the belief in God and desire for Him that is the basis for contemplative prayer. But they are not in themselves our core. When we let go of a thought or emotion while practicing contemplative prayer we begin to discover for ourselves this truth about ourselves. We find there is a place deeper within us into which we can step, behind our thoughts and emotions. In fact, one of the terms for this prayer I am talking about is “the Prayer of the Heart.”

The heart in Christian understanding is difficult for us to relate to because it is not simply one aspect of our consciousness. We can be conscious of physical sensations, thoughts, feelings, decisions, and desires, and we can associate these aspects of our experience with different parts of our body and/or different powers of our soul. But the heart is not like any of these.

The word “heart” occurs 726 times in the New American Standard Bible. Simply going through the first several books of the Bible we find that the heart is associated with, for example, thoughts, joy, intention, hatred, love, desires, fear, understanding, obedience, resolve, and sadness.

Thus, in Scripture we find that each aspect of experience mentioned above is connected with the heart—physical sensations, thoughts, feelings, decisions, and desires. Accordingly, the heart is related to each of these faculties, but is deeper than any of them. It becomes clear in the New Testament that the heart is, “the center of the personality...the place in which God reveals himself to men” (T. Sorg in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* 2:182). “The heart is that in man which is addressed by God. It is the seat of doubt and hardness as well as of faith and obedience” (*ibid.*). Sin has darkened the human heart, and thereby has infected all aspects of life (*Romans* 1.21-32; *Ephesians* 4.17-19). Salvation is likewise from the heart out, with both faith and obedience associated with the heart (*Romans* 10.6-10; *Romans* 6.17-18).

Thus, the heart is the center of the individual in the sense that it is the point of integration for the various faculties of a person. From it flow our thoughts, feelings, decisions and desires (*Mark* 7.21-23), which are themselves also closely associated with our physical sensations. As an early Christian spiritual master puts it,

The divine grace writes on the ‘tables of the heart’ (*2 Corinthians* 3.3) the laws of the Spirit and the heavenly mysteries. For the heart directs and governs all the other organs of the body. And when grace pastures the heart, it rules over all the members and the thoughts. For there, in the heart, the mind abides as well as all the thoughts of the soul and all its hopes. This is how grace penetrates throughout all parts of the body.

(Pseudo-Marcarius, *Homily* 15.20, late 4th century)

Because the heart is the source of our thoughts and feelings we experience our heart through thought and feeling, but we cannot get at the heart itself through thought or feeling. For any thought or feeling would be a product of the heart, not the heart itself. In a sense the heart is like the sub-conscious in that it lays behind our thoughts and emotions, but it is even deeper than the sub-conscious. This is why psychotherapy can be

very helpful for some folks at times, but in itself it cannot go deep enough to get to the roots where our deepest cure must take place.

So our contact with the heart itself will not be in the form of thoughts or feelings. This is why in the Prayer of the Heart one steps back from any thoughts or emotions that may come up. The will is set on God. The mind is not switched off, but rather given a very simple task which it is to do very gently: provide a point of focus for our attention towards God. And our emotions are not killed, but given a simple task to gently but clearly love God as a point of focus for our intention towards God. So our thinking and feeling faculties help with attention and intention, but not with content—any content they produce is set aside, we step back from it to be with God at our very center. The body also is involved in the Prayer of the Heart. We quiet our bodies, relaxing from any tension and putting ourselves in a stable position which will not cause discomfort nor require attention. In this way the Prayer of the Heart is a prayer in which the total person is involved—physical sensations, thoughts, feelings, decisions, and desires.

So the Prayer of the Heart is a prayer of pure faith and love, in that we simply let go of all thoughts, feelings and images, and in silence stand or sit before God with the conviction that He is near, that He sees and listens with an awesome, numinous Presence that is filled with holiness and love. We simply put ourselves in His Presence and let Him speak and interact with our heart on a level deeper than our consciousness. “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye” (Antoine de Saint Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, cf. 2 *Corinthians* 4.18).

The heart as our center and our point of contact with God is often associated in ancient Christian teaching with the image of God in man. As such our fallen faculties have a hard time understanding the heart because it is itself otherworldly. It is a little like the wardrobe in the children’s story *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, by C.S. Lewis. The wooden wardrobe closet was the point of contact between earth and the world of Narnia. The children first entered Narnia by hiding in the wardrobe, but as they moved through the coats to the back of the closet there were layers of coats, and then instead of coats they were moving through trees in Narnia. In a later story in the series (the very end of *The Magician’s Nephew*) we learn that the wardrobe itself was made from wood from Narnia. So the wardrobe was a bit of Narnia on the earth, just like the human heart as the image of God is a bit of the unseen realm on earth.

Until people actually begin to make contact with their heart in this deep sense of the heart, the language of Scripture about such things will be puzzling. To those in the Matrix the real world is unknown or inconceivable. This thought sounds like Gnosticism, but in fact any revealed religion assumes there is truth to be known that must be revealed. As the ancient Fathers who battled Gnosticism, like St. Clement of Alexandria, said, Christianity is the true gnosis. So imagery like the wardrobe may help, but actual time in some form of the Prayer of the Heart is the only way to begin to understand.

For, as A Monk of the Eastern Church expresses in a wonderful way, the prayer itself helps unite our life.

Strenuous exertion and the search for intensity will be of no avail. As you repeat the Holy Name, gather quietly, little by little, your thoughts and feelings and will around it; gather around it your whole being. Let the Name penetrate your soul as a drop of

oil spreads out and impregnates a cloth. Let nothing of yourself escape. Surrender your whole self and enclose it within the Name.

(A Monk of the Eastern Church [Fr. Lev Gillet], *On the Invocation of the Name of Jesus* [London: The Fellowship of St. Alban and St Sergius, 1946], p. 3).

The integration of our life is only one of the possible effects of contemplative forms of prayer. The following are some other related effects.

Distracting thoughts

Once we actually attempt to be silent before the Lord we discover how much inner noise we have. We are preoccupied with the past and the future, while pleasant thoughts, plans, temptations, worries and fears all jostle together. In contemplative prayer we don't try to stop our thoughts, but rather we simply step back from them. When we notice our minds have shifted to a thought or emotion, we simply note that fact and gently return to the word or image that focuses us on God's Presence.

Some days distracting thoughts are very strong and other days they are less so. It does not matter much, since this prayer is a focus of our love towards God and a receptivity towards Him. If we have to keep redirecting our attention towards Him many times each minute, then this fact need not concern us, since this also is an expression of our love. Indeed, it may be more clearly a loving gesture towards Him than when we have a sense of peace, since we can slip into desiring the peace more than God Himself and end up in idolatry.

Inner healing

Such resting in God's Presence brings healing to the heart. All of us have wounds that need to be healed. These wounds are very deep, down in the heart beyond the place therapy can reach, though therapy can be helpful as well in some situations. In the Prayer of the Heart, God's Spirit enters the heart and brings healing. At times we will be aware of what He is doing, but at other times He simply does things that never get filtered through our conscious minds.

Sometimes in more contemplative forms of prayer a thought or memory or emotion may come out of nowhere and startle us. Often this is due to the work of the Spirit in our hearts, breaking up hardened bits which then float to the surface. The silence of the prayer can act like a depth charge going off in our hearts and bringing things to our consciousness of which we would not otherwise be aware. Or He may be bringing something to mind so we can offer it to God, either with repentance, if it is a past sin, or with forgiveness, or some other appropriate response. We should simply respond briefly, then let these thoughts go just like any other thoughts and return to our attention to the Lord Himself. While the experience of such thoughts, memories or emotions can be disturbing it need not be so if we understand what is going on and see it as part of the Lord's gracious work in our lives.

Centered living

The end of Compline in the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* includes the prayer, "Guide us waking O Lord and guard us sleeping, that awake we may watch with Christ

and asleep we may rest in peace.” As C. S. Lewis has said, “The great thing is to come awake, or rather, to stay awake.” The Prayer of the Heart helps us come awake, and our practice of it during the day helps us stay awake, watching with Christ.

Too often we go through the day like bats. Bats dart about in every direction because they are feeding on insects, using sonar to sense the insect and go after it. At times we also are living by sonar, that is, living merely in reaction to stimuli in our environment. Obviously we do need to be responsive to people and situations we encounter, but often we do so without being conscious of the Presence of the Lord. As we practice the Prayer of the Heart we begin to be aware of His Presence throughout the day and can respond to people and situations as Christ would have us, rather than just reactively. Instead of being on the rim being whipped around, we can live from the center, the “still point of the turning world” (T. S. Eliot).

Such centered living is assumed in the Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew 5–7*). When Jesus says His disciple is to turn the other cheek (*Matthew 5.39*), He is describing someone who is living from their heart rather than simply reacting to stimuli in the environment on the natural level of fight or flight. Similarly, when Jesus says that anyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart (*Matthew 5.28*), He is calling His disciple to a life centered in God. This is another example of a stimulus in the environment, this time one that is attractive and which one selfishly wants to possess.

A developed habit of contemplative prayer gives us one way of stepping back from the stimuli and responding from Christ’s resources and according to His will. The fruit of such prayer is not necessarily any thoughts, feelings or intentions, but does include a changed life that begins to be manifest over time. Such prayer also begins to teach us, as a by-product, how to find our own hearts. As we begin to learn how to enter the heart we can practice the Presence of God in this way even during our daily activities.

Indeed, the saints teach that through such prayer we not only become whole and integrated ourselves but also make contact in new ways with God and the world, including both the visible world and the invisible spiritual world. A Christian spiritual master from around AD 380 says, “There are infinite depths to the human heart. There are found reception rooms, bedrooms, doors and antechambers, many offices and exits. There is found the office of justice and of injustice. There is death and there is life. There takes place upright business as well as the contrary” (Pseudo-Marcarius, *Homily 15.32*, late 4th century). Again, he says, “The heart itself is but a small vessel, yet there also are dragons and there are lions; there are poisonous beasts and all the treasures of evil. And there are rough and uneven roads; there are precipices. But there is also God, also the angels, the life and the kingdom, the light and the Apostles, the treasures of grace—there are all things (Pseudo-Marcarius, *Homily 43.7*). Later, St. Isaac the Syrian (died about AD 700) says, “Enter eagerly into the treasurehouse (the heart) that lies within you, and so you will see the treasurehouse of heaven. For the two are the same, and there is but one single entry to them both. The ladder that leads to the Kingdom is hidden within you, and is found in your soul. Dive into yourself, and in your soul you will discover the rungs by which you are to ascend.”

Dealing with temptation

Learning how to detach from particular thoughts and emotions and focus on the Lord is a particularly powerful weapon against temptation. The temptation itself is not a sin. Jesus Himself was tempted in all ways as we are yet without sin (*Hebrews 4.15*). The temptation is like the salesman's knock at the door. If we pay attention to the knock and then walk over to the door, open it, listen to the sales pitch and buy the goods, we are, at each stage, sinning in increasing degrees.

The best way to deal with temptation is to detach from the thought when it first arises. If, through the Prayer of the Heart, we grow in inner stillness and awareness, we can recognize the temptation when it first appears and can detach from it in the same way we do from all thoughts during our time of contemplative prayer.

This detachment from the tempting thought robs it of its power. If instead, we fuss about it or pray against it, we are focusing on it and thereby giving it energy. If we turn from it immediately and focus on the Lord Himself and His loving Presence, the power of the temptation subsides.

Sometimes temptations are stronger than at other times due to our weaknesses and addictions (in a general sense of this term). The power of some sins in our lives may not be broken except after long years of struggle. But always the key factor is the grace of the Lord. The Prayer of the Heart is the practicing of the Presence of this gracious Lord.

Loving service

If the prayer of the heart helps us deal with temptation and face adversity, it also helps us be of genuine service to God. Some form of listening prayer is vital in our service for the Lord. If when praying we only speak and never listen, then our relation with the Lord will be very limited and we even run the risk of doing things for Him which are in fact not pleasing to Him.

Jesus warns us about this possibility when He says there will be many who call Him 'Lord' yet who do not do what He says (*Matthew 7.21-23*). They will say, "We prophesied in your name, cast out demons in your name, and did many mighty works in your name," but Jesus will respond, "I never knew you. Depart from me you workers of lawlessness." Here we see how crucial it is that we cultivate a receptive heart that listens to God and can hear His word, and then do *His* works by His grace.

Not only does such prayer help us hear our Lord, it also helps us see more clearly and lovingly the people we encounter. Truly loving deeds must proceed from a heart which is centered in God and which is being purified from the spin which the false self puts on life.

Contemplative prayer and other forms of prayer

The Prayer of the Heart integrates well with other forms of prayer. Here are just a couple of ideas.

Liturgical Prayer. Spending time in a form of contemplative prayer before worship helps one enter more fully into the worship. This is especially important for those leading worship, since they need to be conscious of the Lord's Presence so the prayers they say are actually said to the Lord and not to the congregation as some sort of performance.

Intercession. Contemplative forms of prayer can themselves be used for intercession. After we have opened ourselves to God's Presence and been attentive to Him, we can

bring others into that Presence, either by saying their name in His Presence or picturing them before Him. This is a simple but very powerful form of intercessory prayer.

Dangers in contemplative forms of prayer

Danger can arise if we practice the more extreme forms of physical control found in some forms of contemplative prayer. A gentle attention to the breath is not a danger, but more intensive forms of control of the breath or the beating of the heart can interfere with these functions and cause damage. Such practices should be avoided unless one has a competent guide.

Another form of danger occurs if we let our mind go blank, rather than focusing on the Lord. Such a condition can open us to demonic suggestion.

Sometimes people try to practice contemplative forms of prayer, but in fact they only daydream. Instead of an alert concentration on God, they simply let their minds roam among various thoughts and feelings, with perhaps a vague sense of God in the background. Such woolgathering is not the Prayer of the Heart and can have the negative effect of making us more vague and fuzzy in the rest of our life.

Since contemplative forms of prayer can be disturbing or even dangerous, it is often recommended that we have a spiritual director, or at least a close friend who is sympathetic with such prayer with whom to share something of what we are experiencing. However, if we avoid excessive interference with our breathing and heartbeat, and if we focus on the Lord, asking for His guidance and protection, there need be no danger. The regular reading of Scripture and participation in Christian community, especially worship, are further safeguards.

Along with these practical dangers there are also potential theological dangers. Those who seek to simply attend to God's Presence as such, with no thoughts of any sort, are practicing an ancient and valuable form of Christian prayer, but such prayer can run the risk of seeking a God beyond God, like some of the ancient Gnostics, and denying the Incarnation. We can guard against this danger by putting our contemplative prayer in the context of *lectio divina*, the meditative reading of Scripture.

Similarly, such forms of prayer can promote unmediated God-mysticism. The focus of the New Testament, however, is the Presence of God mediated to us in Jesus, the divine/human Son. Indeed, St. John seems to consciously reject unmediated God-mysticism, insisting that no one has seen God apart from Christ (e.g., *John* 1.18). The writings of John Main contain much help in understanding the role of Christ and the Holy Spirit in contemplative prayer.

Contemplative prayer and other religions

Despite the witness of the New Testament and Christian tradition to the uniqueness of Jesus, some people, including some contemporary Christians, would say Christ is unnecessary or even irrelevant for non-Christians. Indeed, in the light of significant similarities between Christian contemplative prayer and such prayer in other religions, many recent writers seem to have a hard time doing justice to the exclusive claims for Christ found in the Scriptures and historic Christianity. The ancient Church already dealt with the relation between the exclusive lordship of Christ and the presence of truth in non-Christian religions and philosophies, affirming both without undermining either. But many today, unfortunately, seem to feel they must reject either the exclusivity of Christ,

or the fact that elements of truth are found in other religions. This subject is beyond the scope of this article, but something should be said about similarities in some of the forms of prayer and meditation.

The similarities between Christian and some non-Christian forms of prayer and meditation cause some Christians to reject all such forms of prayer as non-Christian. I have already noted, however, that such forms of prayer have a very ancient history in the Church, and they do not have to lead to a dilution of the traditional Christian teachings. Instead, the differences in theology and philosophy between the religions can be recognized, while also finding benefit in their teachings regarding similar kinds of silent prayer and meditation. For example, I have found Buddhist teaching on the practice of mindfulness very helpful in developing concentration and attention, even though mindfulness is not itself a form of prayer (see the bibliography below). Similarly, I have found much of value in books on meditation by Eknath Easwaran, who comes from a Hindu tradition. The form of meditation he offers is very similar to the Christian practice of *lectio divina*, the slow meditative reading of a passage of Scripture, and to the repetition of the Jesus Prayer.

Certainly there are elements in these resources that are contrary to a traditional Christian understanding, so discernment is needed. But then discernment is needed when reading any book, including ones by Christians. When I recommend a book in class I often note that I don't agree with everything in any book, even the ones I've written. Jesus alone is the Truth and thus our ultimate criterion of truth. Our access to His living Presence through the Prayer of the Heart complements the revelation we have in Holy Scripture, which together, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, help us, "test all things and hold fast to the good" (*1 Thessalonians 5.21*).

The invitation of contemplative prayer

St. Paul says we have been blessed by God, "with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus" (*Ephesians 1.3*). We have been raised with Christ (*Colossians 2.12*) and so, Paul says, we should, "seek those things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (*Colossians 3.1*). We are to do so by, "setting our minds on the things above" (*Colossians 3.2*), which is a part of the putting off of the old self and putting on of the new (*Colossians 3.3–4.6*).

Contemplative forms of prayer are one way in which we can do what Paul says and begin to experience the new kind of life which we have in Christ. Not that these forms of prayer are a mere technique that produces certain experiences. Rather, such prayer is a seeking of God Himself and the things above through a yielding to God's Presence which we discern through faith (*Hebrews 11.1*). Such prayer is not a technique to produce results, but a way of relating to God with our whole being from the heart out.

For God alone my soul in silence waits....
(*Psalms 62.1*)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

There is much more to be said. The following books are a very few of the many good books on such forms of prayer.

Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (Oxford: University Press, 2006).

This is an exceptionally helpful book that touches on many of the traditions represented in the resources that follow in this list. Laird draws upon both ancient Christian teaching and contemporary experience in ways that clarify and inspire.

ON THE JESUS PRAYER

A Monk of the Eastern Church, Archimandrite Lev Gillet, *The Jesus Prayer*, rev. ed. (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987).

Fr. Lev discusses the history of the prayer from the Scriptures to our own time. A section of practical guidelines (pp. 93-106), contains the text of *On the Invocation of the Name of Jesus*, quoted above, but in a different translation.

Brother Ramon and Simon Barrington-Ward, *Praying the Jesus Prayer Together* (Hendrickson, 2004).

An engaging and accessible discussion of the Jesus Prayer by an Anglican Franciscan hermit and an Anglican bishop. They pass on what they have learned from their Orthodox instructors and from their own experience and reflection.

Igumen Chariton, comp., *The Art of Prayer: An Orthodox Anthology* (Faber and Faber, 1966).

A collection of mostly 19th century Russian texts on praying with the mind in the heart, including teaching about the Jesus Prayer in particular.

R. M. French, tran., *The Way of a Pilgrim and The Pilgrim Continues His Way*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

A classic spiritual writing, recounting the travels of a homeless Russian peasant in the 19th century who seeks to learn how to pray without ceasing and finds instruction in the Jesus Prayer.

Website: There are a number of websites related to the Jesus Prayer. One helpful one is http://www.monachos.net/monasticism/jesus_prayer.shtml

ON CENTERING PRAYER

Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel*, reissue ed. (Continuum, 1994).

Fr. Keating's main introduction to Centering Prayer, both its history and its practice, including discussion of the role of the mind.

Thomas Keating, *Intimacy With God* (Crossroad, 1994).

Perhaps Fr. Keating's best general introduction to Centering Prayer, discussing briefly many of the themes he develops in his other writings.

Gustave Reininger, ed., *Centering Prayer In Daily Life and Ministry* (Continuum, 1998).

A collection of essays by eleven different authors on the general theme of the effect of Centering Prayer on daily life. Some of the essays are theoretical, and others more practical.

William Johnston, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Doubleday/Image, 1976).

The classic 14th century text on the prayer of loving intent toward God, the basis of Centering Prayer.

Website for Contemplative Outreach, Ltd.: <http://www.coutreach.org/>

ON FR. JOHN MAIN

John Main, *Moment of Christ: The Path of Meditation* (Continuum, 1984).

Fr. Main advocates as a prayer word, or mantra, the distinctly Christian word "maranatha" (see *1 Corinthians* 16.22). This book consists of transcripts of brief talks Fr. Main delivered at the weekly sessions of a contemplative prayer group which he led.

Paul Harris, ed., *Silence and Stillness in Every Season: Daily Readings with John Main* (Continuum, 2006).

Fr. John Main wrote a number of books, most of them transcripts from his talks. This book provides a wonderful sampling of Fr. Main's writings.

Website for the World Community for Christian Meditation: <http://www.wccm.org/>

This website contains writings of Fr. Main as well as his successor, Fr. Laurence Freeman. Fr. Main's writings often contain insights from the Scriptures. Fr. Freeman has other interests, including dialog with other religions.

NON-CHRISTIAN RESOURCES

As noted above, when read with discernment there is much help available in non-Christian resources. I begin with three guides to the Buddhist practice of mindfulness which provide helpful insights regarding concentration and attention.

Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation* (Beacon, 1987).

Stephen Levine, *A Gradual Awakening* (Anchor, 1979).

Venerable Henepola Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English* (Wisdom, 1992).

Eknath Easwaran, *Meditation: A simple eight-point program for translating spiritual ideals into daily life* (Nilgiri, 1991).

Easwaran's eight points are found in Christian teaching as well. His clear explanations and illuminating illustrations make this a valuable resource.

Eknath Easwaran, *Seeing With the Eyes of Love: On the Imitation of Christ* (Nilgiri, 1996).

As the subtitle suggests, this is a commentary on sections of Thomas à Kempis classic work. As such, this book is especially accessible for Christians.

Website for Eknath Easwaran: <http://www.easwaran.org/>

Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience* (ISPCK, 1974).

This book is by a Catholic monk who moved to India and engaged Hinduism deeply, both in theory and in practice. He discusses the truth present in Hindu experience and its place in Christianity. Then he goes on to describe the deeper truth of the Christian vision of the Holy Trinity. Unlike the other books in this bibliography, this work is not so much a practical guide as it is a discussion of alternative visions of ultimate Reality.

OF RELATED INTEREST

Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God and The Spiritual Maxims* (Dover, 2005).

The well-known classic by a 17th century Carmelite monk.

Peter Toon, *The Art of Meditating on Scripture: Understanding Your Faith, Renewing Your Mind, Knowing Your God* (Zondervan, 1993).

A general introduction to both contemplative prayer and meditation on Scripture, drawing on Patristic and Reformation resources, as well as John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila.

Jan Johnson, *When the Soul Listens* (NavPress, 1999).

A clear and wide-ranging introduction to practicing the Presence of God in daily life.

Lynda L. Graybeal and Julia L. Roller, *Connecting with God: A Spiritual Formation Guide, A Renovaré Resource* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

An excellent guide for individuals and groups to discerning God's Presence and hearing His word.

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