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CHRISTIANITY

Classical, modern and postmodern forms of contemplation

Michael Stoeber and JaeGil Lee

Introduction

This chapter outlines significant forms of contemplation, focusing on certain major figures – John Cassian, the author of The Cloud of Unknowing, Francisco de Osuna, St. Teresa of Avila, Evelyn Underhill, St. Gregory Palamas, Thomas Keating and John Main. Emphasising the current popular forms of Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation, the chapter illustrates how contemplation in Christianity has evolved in dialogue with various Christian sources, as well as with meditative and other yogic practices of certain Asian religious traditions. It begins by contextualising Christian contemplation within the framework of types of prayer, outlines classic texts and contemplative recollection, and then develops popular contemporary practices and their possible influences.

Contemplation within the context of Christian prayer

In Christianity, prayer is thought to be communion with God who, as ultimate and eternal Being, is singular, personal, creative and active in the natural world. Such communion takes various forms: adoration (respectful love), thanksgiving (gratitude), confession (moral and spiritual self-discernment and forgiveness), petition (hopeful appeal), intercession (intentional support for others), praise (grateful admiration), lament (expressions of sorrow or anger), meditative lectio and visio divina (thoughtful reflection on scripture or visual images) and contemplation (contemplatio – radical stillness in the presence of God, personal awareness of God or union with God). There are standard ritual forms of these various kinds of prayers as well as openness to creative individual expressions in conjunction with certain sacramental actions or movements, such as bowing, kneeling, genuflection, prostration, performing the sign of the cross and dance.¹ In some contemporary contexts, various types of artistic creativity are regarded in themselves as prayer forms, though traditionally art was only linked as a supportive medium with other forms of prayer.²

Some contemporary commentators have criticised hierarchies of prayer and spiritual experience (Jantzen 1995: 12–25; Raphael 1994: 513–515; Stoeber 2015/2017: 10–11, 22–28). However, traditionally Christian prayer has been characterised as having organic and developmental qualities, where one is called to deepen and intensify a fundamental communion...
with her or his creative Source. Within such contexts, contemplation is clearly marked off. While other types of prayer can involve the senses, imagination, emotions, reflective cognition and/or physical movement, contemplation normally aspires to a relatively passive, static and non-discursive self-opening to God. One traditional classification includes four grades or degrees: discursive, affective, simple and contemplative. (1) Discursive prayer involves the three major faculties of the mind – will, memory and understanding – where the practitioner actively uses these three powers to understand and reflect upon scriptures or other Christian teachings, while raising one’s love and adoration towards God. For this reason, it is also called active meditation. As discursive prayer becomes dominated by activities of the will, there is a decrease in thought and reason, and (2) affective prayer is initiated – where feelings are transformed, purified and refined within this devotional context. When there remains only a single aspiration focused on God, it is called (3) the prayer of simplicity or ‘simple regard’, which culminates in (4) contemplative union (Johnston 1989: 44–50; 1982: 29–30).

This movement has also been classified generally in terms of three levels: vocal meditative and contemplative. When advancing in prayer, one moves from (1) verbal prayer via sound movements, to (2) mental/reflective prayer of the quieted mind, and finally to (3) contemplative prayer, where thoughts and feelings are radically stilled and the felt-sense presence of God becomes prominent (Mursell 2001: 209). Again, these three levels are compatible with the traditional Christian stages of the mystical journey, which was probably first suggested by Origen of Alexandria (185–253) and fully developed by Pseudo-Dionysius (fifth or sixth century): (1) Purification – which is moral, affective and spiritual transformation through prayer and ascetic practices (such as abstinence, sensory deprivation or flagellation); (2) Illumination – where continued transformative moral, meditative and contemplative practices lead to visions of the divine Presence in various forms; and (3) Contemplation – whereby the mystic is opened to union with this Presence, which inspires and influences her or him creatively (Origen 1954).

Classics of Christian contemplation

John Cassian

Although Christian prayer develops as an extension of practices already present in Judaism, its Christianisation became more formalised through the development of such texts as the Didache (Teaching) (first or second century) and the writings of Origen and other early Church Fathers, with John Cassian (360–435) being one of the more significant early authorities on Christian contemplation. His well-formulated written approach to contemplation becomes influential within the western monastic tradition and it later influences contemporary monastic and lay practice, especially through adaptations by John Main (see below), as well as influencing the Jesus Prayer (see below). Cassian attributes its method to Egyptian desert Fathers under whom he and his friend Germanus studied. In The Conferences Nine and Ten, he focuses exclusively on the theme of prayer, which is presented in the form of dialogues among Cassian, Germanus and their mentor Abba Isaac. Influenced by Origen and Evagrius of Ponticus (346–399), Cassian held that unmediated communion with God is the highest state of prayer. It aims for liberation from worldly concerns and inner distortions and distractions in attaining perpetual awareness of God. Naturally, then, given God’s infinite and transcendent nature, this contemplative state is characterised by ineffability. Cassian called this contemplation ‘pure prayer’, where one’s mind goes beyond itself, becoming free from sounds, concepts and images, within the context of the goal of ‘unceasing’ practice, where it would become a perpetual state of the heart – where the person ideally remains in permanent communion with God.
Cassian’s method—traditionally called ‘monologistic prayer’—involves a continual repetition of a short biblical phrase. A specific formula prescribed by Cassian is Psalms verse 70:1: ‘Come to my help, O God; Lord, hurry to my rescue’. One fixes one’s mind and heart on these simple words, passionately reciting this formula as a cry for divine help. The monk constantly pleads for God’s assistance as he struggles to transcend his own thoughts, emotional moods and passions. Cassian, following Abba Isaac, claims that this specific verse was chosen from the entire body of scripture because it encompasses essential human affections and emotions: powerlessness, fear, devout sentiment, devotional ardour, burning love and humility. Cassian’s method admonishes the monk to exert not only mental but also emotional/affective concentration in reciting the prayer formula.

The Cloud of Unknowing

Another influential text for contemplative prayer in the Christian west is The Cloud of Unknowing (1349–1396), which was written anonymously, possibly by a Carthusian priest. An accessible and influential modern translation and introduction was published by Evelyn Underhill in 1912, with a number of others following; other popular writings on meditation have included substantial dependence upon The Cloud’s method of prayer, such as Aldous Huxley’s The Perennial Philosophy (1970: 273–291). Quite apart from the contributions of Centering Prayer to the popularity of The Cloud (see below), the book has drawn attention from both Christian and non-Christian spiritual seekers because of its practicality and straightforward simplicity. Influenced by the apophatic theology of Pseudo-Dionysius, The Cloud also incorporates affective mysticism into the dynamic. In the exercise of contemplative prayer, one not only frees oneself from all images and discursive thoughts (a negative path), but also reaches out to God through ‘the blind stirring’ of love (an affective path). Contemplative prayer is an action of intentional will, driven by love, and it leads to ‘a union of love’ (Hodgson 1944: lxii).

To reach out to God, a person is instructed to create two types of meditative conditions in the mind, which are imaged as clouds: the ‘cloud of forgetting’ and the ‘cloud of unknowing’. The cloud of forgetting symbolises the effort to let go of one’s learned sense and cognitive reflection on natural phenomena, while the cloud of unknowing is a psychic orientation of radical openness to a purely spiritual Reality that cannot be known in any normal sense. One needs to open one’s self to God’s presence, apart from the senses, cognitions and feelings. Yet, this contemplative exercise is to be somewhat vigorous and even aggressive, as the author advises the contemplative to ‘trample unwanted thoughts’ under the cloud of forgetting and to strike the cloud of unknowing with ‘the sharp dart of longing love’. Regarding method, the author writes that ‘a simple reaching out directly towards God [by a humble impulse of love] is sufficient’, without any other means of support. He provides a practical technique, suggesting ‘If you like, you can have this reaching out, wrapped up and enfolded in a single word’, such as ‘God’, ‘love’, ‘fire’ or even ‘sin’ (Walsh 1981: 133–134, 195–198). In The Cloud, the single prayer-word is referred to as both a ‘shield’ and a ‘spear’: a shield which protects from distracting thoughts, and a spear to pierce the cloud of unknowing and reach God beyond. In terms of inner posture, The Cloud’s method is categorised as a kind of ‘ejaculatory prayer’ (McGinn 2012: 412; 1987: 200). The prayer-word is to reflect a fervent and humble longing, expressing the love for God and an appeal for immediate assistance.

Recollection: St. Teresa of Avila

Along with various contemplative prayer practices influenced by Cassian and The Cloud, which evolved in the later middle ages, the ‘prayer of recollection’ (recogimiento) also became popular
among some Christian contemplatives in the west by the time of the reformation. This contemplative practice gained modern interest especially due to the popularity of the writings of St. Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) and Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941). The influence of Teresa, who was also declared a doctor of the Roman Catholic church in 1970, extends well beyond her Carmelite order, as she is widely regarded as a spiritual giant; and Underhill was an extremely popular lay Anglican writer, who wrote thirty-nine books and more than 350 articles and reviews on the spiritual classics, mysticism and prayer.

Like Cassian’s unceasing prayer and *The Cloud’s* ejaculatory prayer, the prayer of recollection intentionally aims towards a non-discursive experience of God. St. Teresa and Underhill place ‘recollection’ as the first degree of a prayer dynamic that develops into the prayers of contemplative ‘quiet’ and ‘union’. In her last and most well-known work, _Interior Castle_, Teresa describes an inward-oriented journey, which she symbolises as a movement through seven rooms of a castle, culminating in the direct encounter in the inmost room with God, who resides at the core of the human person, as ultimate creative Source (Teresa 1980).

Of uncertain origin, the prayer of recollection in the west became influential in early-sixteenth-century Spain. Given Teresa’s Jewish ancestry, it is interesting that we do find a similar form of contemplative recollection in Jewish sources. In Christian contexts, while medieval popular devotional forms of religious practice were strong, Franciscans also taught recollection to both religious and lay people, though the practice came under Inquisitorial suspicion later that century. At that time in Spain, a few texts on this topic written by Franciscan friars became enormously popular as ‘guides to what today would be called contemplative prayer’ (Short 2007: 449). One such book was Francisco de Osuna’s _The Third Spiritual Alphabet_ (1527). Teresa received a copy of this book from her uncle, which she took as her guide for interior prayer and later adapted, as Superior in her reformed Carmelite community, in support of the formation of novices (Teresa 1987: 66–67).

As its name implies, recollection seeks to re-collect one’s ordinary field of consciousness, which is usually scattered with thoughts, images and emotions. The practice of recollection enables one to narrow and concentrate one’s consciousness on a specific object, which gradually becomes a one-pointed focus. It is a typically taxing exercise to hold one’s attention on a single object and repeatedly bring that attention back whenever one’s mind drifts. Teresa compares the mind to a wild horse; Osuna (1981) likens the process to domesticating a wild bird in a cage. It requires a great deal of effort and perseverance until a habitual state of recollection settles in one’s consciousness. The dynamic is complicated by the intrusion of unconscious distortions and vices – negative passions and spirits that resist the transformative opening to the divine Presence. For Osuna and Teresa, the prayer of recollection enables a shift of one’s conscious awareness to the centre of one’s being, the inmost place of the soul, where the transmuting encounter with God takes place. Teresa writes: ‘the soul collects its faculties together and enters within itself to be with its God’ (Teresa 1980: 141). Ideally, the process shifts from forms of ‘natural contemplation’ – where the person works with a spiritual director to remove his or her own distortions and resistances to underlying spirit via moral and ascetic practices – to ‘infused contemplation’ – where spiritual Reality becomes the active component within a dynamic of passive openness to inspiring and regenerative energies.

Because the goal of recollection is to deepen one’s relationship with God, scriptural/religious words or images are used as initial objects of concentration. Osuna instructs his readers to recite a short formula such as ‘O God of my heart and my inmost being’, or a short phrase from the Lord’s Prayer, or to imagine the sacred passion of Christ. Due to her own inability
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to picture Christ with her imagination, St. Teresa developed a unique way of recollection and taught it to her nuns. She asked them to represent rather than visualise Christ being close to them, as if a person is in a dark room with one’s friend, sensing or feeling his presence without seeing him (Teresa 1987: 102; 1980: 133–134). She also suggests incorporating a short prayer formula, particularly from the Lord’s Prayer, with such a simple posture of openness to Christ’s presence (Teresa 1980: 128–131).

In Osuna and Teresa’s recollection, like The Cloud’s contemplative exercise, the affective nature of contemplation is potent. Mental concentration is accompanied by the intentional energy of love. It is arduous desire and fervent affection for God that gathers together the dispersed self and enables it to move closer to God. Representing the Franciscan tradition, which stresses affective spirituality, Osuna more keenly emphasises love: ‘our love is dispersed throughout human concerns, we must recover it and draw it back, gathering in all our love as payment to God’ (Osuna 1981: 418–419). For Osuna and Teresa, the practice of recollection intensifies one’s longing and love within the expanding simplification of one’s field of consciousness.

**Recollection: Evelyn Underhill**

Although Evelyn Underhill belongs to the ‘modern’ period historically, her work is ‘classical’ in terms of both its sources and its influence. Underhill is one of the most significant early-twentieth-century figures to bring wide public attention to translated Christian spiritual classics for both a religious and a lay audience. She appears to have developed her understanding and method of the prayer of recollection primarily from Teresa, though she draws on others, including the author of The Cloud, Jacob Boehme, Richard of St. Victor, Walter Hilton, Meister Eckhart, St. Bernard of Clairvaux and Jan van Ruusbroek (Underhill 1990). She uses the word ‘recollection’ as an umbrella term to refer to the deliberate and active practice and process of turning inward, which she calls ‘introversion’. Through recollection, mystics develop an inner capacity to perceive spiritual realities and deepen an increasing awareness of underlying intimate connection with God. In Practical Mysticism, she provides a practical approach to the prayer of recollection, defining it as ‘the subjection of the attention to the control of the will’ where people seek to obtain ‘control of their own mental processes’ (Underhill 1914: 46). According to Underhill, recollection is a universal psycho-spiritual practice found in many authentic religions. It works to exercise human consciousness in building the contemplative powers of attention and concentration.

Recollection is a voluntary undertaking that begins by focusing upon a specific object. Religious persons may select a sacred word or image from their religious traditions as a focal point, though Underhill suggests one can choose almost any object from various aspects of life and nature for this exercise. Recollection is a practical method intended to enable a person gradually to move through a process of introversion into her or his underlying spiritual centre or core: first (1) to protect oneself from the typical onslaught of sensory phenomena, then (2) to still the normal processes of conscious imagination and cognition, and eventually (3) to focus one’s consciousness directly towards the meditative object, where it completely dominates one’s attention, in blissful absorption.

According to Underhill, in both traditional and contemporary Christian contexts, the practitioner is encouraged not to rest in this quietist absorption, however attractive and comfortable this experience might be, but to become open to a transitional shift, where meditative ‘Quiet’ ideally opens to an awareness of various dynamic spiritual realities, in a movement from ‘passive’
to ‘infused’ contemplation. Underhill speaks of eventually coming through this process of self-gathering to recognise one’s underlying spiritual Self or Soul:

you will at last discover that there is something within you – something behind the fractious, conflicting life of desire – which you can recollect, gather up, make effective for new life. You will, in fact, know your own soul for the first time.

(Underhill 1914: 76–77)

More significantly, through the regular practice of recollection, the object of meditation gradually transforms into a kind of opening or medium into the spiritual realm. She writes, ‘It ceases to be a picture, and becomes a window through which the mystic peers out into the spiritual universe and apprehends to some extent – though how, he knows not – the veritable presence of God’ (Underhill 1990: 315).

**Eastern Orthodox recollection: the Jesus Prayer**

Sources suggest that the ‘Jesus Prayer’ in Eastern Orthodox Christianity is influenced by a number of early figures, including Gregory of Nyssa (322–398), Evagrius Ponticus, Milus of Ancrya (d. 430) and Diadochos of Photiki (400–486?), but even Origen emphasised the spiritual power of meditating on Jesus’ name. The prayer comes to be associated with Christian ‘Hesychasm’, monastic communities or hermits involved in ascetic practices thought to culminate in a condition of apatheia, where virtues are stabilised in an inner peace or stillness – hesychia – which enables one to love without the inhibitions of the powerful distorting passions (Palamas, 1983: 117, n.2).

St Gregory Palamas (1296–1359) writes of this ideal in terms of what he called ‘unified recollection’ – which he understood as ‘remembrance of God’ – a state of continuous attending to God (1983: 130, n.115). A Hesychast was one who practised the Jesus Prayer and the physical techniques associated with it. The foundational books of Hesychasm are a collection by twenty-five theological masters, written between the fourth and fifteenth centuries, called *Philokalia* (Love of the Beautiful). One of these texts, *Life of Abba Philemon* (sixth–eighth century), includes the Jesus Prayer, originally ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me’, while later orthodoxy adds ‘a sinner’ (from Luke 18:13). Repetition of this prayer-form in a series of 50, 100 or 150, supported by a prayer rope, is sometimes accompanied by physical postures – that is, sitting on a nine-inch stool, head and shoulders bowed, back bent, with eyes pointing towards one’s heart. Between prayer-series, the practice can also include bowing, signs of the cross and movements of prostration, as well as the coordination of breath with the recitation.

The goal of such prayer is radical humility, which was thought to open the practitioner to the healing, purifying and inspiring presence and power of Jesus, which under normal circumstances people resist in their sin. The prayer supports the orthodox ideal of theosis, deification, transformative movement from the human image of God into likeness with the Christ-archetype. For Palamas, and other Orthodox theologians, the idea is to nourish the transformation of natural passions rather than their spiritual transcendence; the ideal includes the physical body transmuted by and in Christ's purifying energies.

**Popular contemporary Christian contemplation**

The Jesus Prayer is still practised today in various forms in Eastern Orthodox traditions, while two of the most popular forms of Christian contemplative prayer in the west today were developed in the 1970s by Thomas Keating (1923–2018) and John Main (1926–1982), named...
Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation, respectively. Keating and Main felt the need to provide a simple how-to contemplative method for Christians who sought a deeper relationship with God, in response to the growing popularity of Eastern meditation practices in the west. They claim these practices are renewed forms of a lost contemplative prayer, adapted for present-day Christians in the west, based primarily on Christian contemplative traditions.

**Centering Prayer**

In his search for an accessible contemplative prayer method in Christian traditions, Keating, with two other Trappists at St. Spencer Abby – William Menninger and Basil Pennington – found it in *The Cloud*. Because of this, the practice was first called the ‘prayer of the cloud’. It later took the more general name ‘Centering Prayer’, which was suggested by retreatants. Following *The Cloud*’s theological stance, Keating stresses the necessity of the negative path. He claims that although the positive (kataphatic) and negative (apophatic) paths are complementary, the latter is a further movement of one’s prayer journey, where, through ‘pure faith’, one can intuitively experience God (Keating 1997: 5). Keating identifies over-activism and over-intellectualism as major obstacles to one’s growth in prayer life. Centering Prayer helps one go beyond the mental level of discursive reflection, to experience God without concepts or images.

‘Intention’ is the central principle in the practice of Centering Prayer. To cultivate the prayer, a practitioner deliberately consents to the presence and action of God within. Keating claims that, as an ‘exercise of intention’, Centering Prayer enables a receptive attitude towards God that is different than concentrative methods (e.g. the Jesus Prayer and Christian Zen Prayer), which use ‘attention’ as the faculty for practice (Keating 2003: 55–58; Bourgeault 2004: 19–21). As a radically receptive method, Centering Prayer requires ‘surrender’ rather than positive effort. There are only four guidelines given for a twice-daily practice of twenty minutes or longer. Participants (1) choose a sacred word as an expression of one’s intention to consent to the divine presence; (2) sit comfortably with eyes closed and introduce the sacred intentional word in silence; (3) when they are distracted by thoughts, gently bring attention back to the sacred word; and (4) following the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a few minutes, before returning to ordinary consciousness (Keating 1997: 139).

It is important to appreciate the role of the sacred word. The practitioner should not think about the meaning of the sacred word during the time of prayer because it is a symbol that expresses one’s intention to surrender to the divine presence. The chosen sacred word is used to renew one’s intention to be fully open and receptive to the presence of God. An overall posture of gentleness and effortlessness is a unique feature of Centering Prayer. In the face of distracting thoughts, the practitioner is encouraged to ever so gently return to the sacred word. According to Keating, ‘Without effort, without trying, we sink into this Presence, letting everything else go’ (Keating 1997: 137). For this reason, Keating claims Centering Prayer is possibly the most receptive method among contemplative prayer forms.

According to Keating, there are three general levels of consciousness. As contemplative attentiveness grows, the practitioner becomes free of the normal flow of ordinary transient thoughts on the surface level of consciousness and enters into a deeper, spiritual level of consciousness, where one experiences oneself as a witness, separate from the concepts, images and feelings of consciousness. There is a therapeutic context to this emotional–spiritual regression, as one overcomes resistances and becomes open to unconscious content and energies. Eventually, sharpened spiritual attentiveness enables one to sense the divine Presence via an even deeper level of consciousness – the source from which one’s life unfolds at every moment.
Keating claims that one finds one’s true self and happiness, and the meaning of life, in the divine Presence, because it is the source of all life to which everyone is connected.

**Christian Meditation**

John Main claims that Christian Meditation is rooted in the tradition of John Cassian, from which he relies primarily on *The Conferences* Nine and Ten. In agreement with Cassian, he believes that a deeper state of prayer leads one to wordless and imageless communion with God. While the prayer life of most Christians tends to remain in the domain of reflective and intentional consciousness, the aim of Christian Meditation is to enable the practitioner continuously to renounce thoughts, images and memories so as to attend solely on God, without normal mediating concepts.

‘Simplicity’ or ‘poverty’ (the pathway to ‘divine stillness’) – terms also explored in detail by Evelyn Underhill – are the centrepiece of Main’s teaching on contemplative prayer (Main 1984: 26–29). From his view, the strength of Cassian’s teaching is found in its ‘commitment to simplicity’ and ‘fidelity to poverty’ that enable one to go beyond the complexities of intellect and imagination in encountering God in a more direct fashion (Main 1982: 12). The practical simplicity of Christian Meditation is also shown in its short, plain instruction, which consists of less than 100 words (Main 1989: ix). At the centre of practical simplicity lies what Main calls the ‘mantra’, which practitioners repeat during the time of prayer. He writes: ‘the simplicity that is required’ is ‘to sit down […] to close [one’s] eyes and to recite the one word from beginning to end’ (Main 1984: 28). While Cassian uses a relatively longer verse (Psalm 70:1: ‘Come to my help, O God; Lord, hurry to my rescue’), Main recommends a single Aramaic word, *maranatha*, as the mantra, which means ‘Come Lord’.

Like Keating, Main instructs one not to think about or reflect on the meaning of the prayer-word while practicing. Rather, the method is to interiorly recite the mantra as four syllables of equal length: *ma-ra-na-tha*. Though not essential, it is suggested to recite it rhythmically, in conjunction with breathing. An effective way of doing this is to gently and silently say every syllable of *ma-ra-na-tha* with the inhalation, while maintaining silence on the exhalation, though what is most important to the meditation is to find one’s own rhythm and pace. An interesting and important instruction is to listen to the interior sound of the word: one should listen to it as ‘the profoundest and most supreme sound in [one’s] being’ (Main 2012: 19). The sonic component of the mantra has significance and power.

Main instructs his practitioners to recite the word continuously throughout the entire period of prayer – unless the mantra naturally fades away by itself – which suggests it is more of a concentrative than receptive method of prayer. Yet, like Centering Prayer, the theoretical context of Christian Meditation proposes a progressive shifting from egoic self-awareness to an awareness of one’s true Self in union with God. This movement is reflected in Main’s description of engagement with the mantra. Initially, the practitioner feels as if the word needs to be recited with one’s mind, in the head. At the beginner’s stage, being easily distracted by inner chatter, one has to expend enormous effort to maintain meditation. But later, through perseverance, the mantra becomes anchored in one’s heart, and it begins to sound rhythmically there, which requires much less effort. Eventually, one comes actually to hear the word sounding in one’s heart, instead of working to sound it. Main claims that when one can naturally hear the sound of the mantra, one’s meditation really begins. In this final stage, one becomes lost in the harmonic sounding and then adrift in the total silence of God (Main 1981: 54–57).
Contemporary Christian contemplation has been influenced by non-Christian meditative traditions in significant ways. We have already mentioned Jewish forms of recollection which might possibly have influenced traditional Christian developments. Significant figures in twentieth-century Christian–Hindu dialogue are Jules Monchanin (Param Arubi Ananda, 1895–1957), Henri Le Saux (Abhishiktananda, 1910–1973), and Bede Griffiths (Swami Dayananda, 1906–1993). Benedictine monks living in India, they studied and learned Hindu sacred texts and yoga practices in integrating certain Indian cultural phenomena – such as language, dress, posture and meditative practices – into their spirituality, which enriched their own Christian understanding and practice of contemplation (Abhishiktananda 1972; Griffiths 1994). Monchanin and Le Saux established Shantivanam Ashram in Tamil Nadu in 1938, and the writings of Abhishiktananda and Griffiths have become influential, though they have not created or promoted concrete forms of contemplative prayer. Similarly, as Paul Pearson observes, the famous Trappist monk Thomas Merton (1915–1968) ‘generally writes of his experience of prayer rather than writing of any methods or techniques he might be using’, emphasising meditation and contemplation (Pearson 2012: vii,viii). Merton too was keen on interreligious dialogue, especially with Zen and Tibetan traditions of Buddhism (Merton and Suzuki 1968). In his spirituality he stressed an opening to one’s inner and underlying self, in intimate union with God, via contemplative and other prayer practices (Merton 1969). He felt that exploring the correspondences and differences of introvertive spirituality among certain non-Christian traditions and Christianity could be mutually enriching.

Main and Keating were aware of the spiritual endeavours and work of such pioneering figures in Christian interreligious dialogue. Also, there is no question that Keating’s and Main’s understanding of contemplative prayer was influenced by their own experience and practice of certain Asian meditation traditions. As abbot at St. Joseph’s Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts (1961–1981), Keating had invited and learned from meditation teachers from Asian traditions since the 1960s, in particular teachers of Transcendental Meditation and Buddhist meditation: he attended several week-long retreats with Zen teacher Joshu Sasaki Roshi. Keating is quite explicit about this influence: Centering Prayer is the result of the effort to ‘harmonize the wisdom of the East with the contemplative tradition of Christianity’ (Keating 2003: 12). Also, Main’s exposure to Asian meditation preceded his entry into the Benedictine order. In 1955, when he was an officer of the British Colonial Service in Malaya (now Peninsular Malaysia), Main met a Hindu monk, Swami Satyananda, who initiated him into Hindu mantra meditation. Every week for a year and a half, Main visited the swami to meditate; later, in his own teaching, Main frequently credits this teacher for the primary instructions in Christian Meditation.

While Keating and Main claim The Cloud and The Conferences as their sources for Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation, there are certain features in their teachings that are not part of the traditional Christian contemplative prayer methods. First, for Keating apophatic contemplative prayer can be practised by a person who has not been prepared by kataphatic prayer forms, such as the first three steps of lectio divina – reading, reflecting and praying – and other devotional practices (2013: 13–14; 1997: 41). In contrast, traditionally The Cloud’s author insists that one should have practised scriptural reading, reflecting and praying as preliminary steps for contemplative prayer. Keating’s non-concern about prerequisites for Centering Prayer seems to reflect more the openness in Zen Buddhism and Transcendental Meditation than restrictions one finds in traditional Christian contemplation.
Moreover, while the contemplative prayer forms in *The Cloud* and *The Conferences* integrate human affections and emotional energy into their practices, Keating and Main do not encourage their practitioners to do so. The lack of emphasis on affective longing and emotional needs or wants is a common feature in Transcendental Meditation, Satyananda’s Hindu mantra meditation and Zen meditation. Also, the actual meaning of the prayer-word in the two present-day prayer forms is much less significant than it is in their Christian sources. In the traditional prayer methods, the meaning is linked with the passionate intentions of these traditional ejaculatory prayers. In contrast, the meaning of the prayer words in Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation are downplayed or transcended — paralleling their context in Transcendental Meditation and Satyananda’s mantra meditation. Indeed, in the case of Christian Meditation it is the sound, not the meaning, of the mantra that matters. Main recalls Satyananda’s teaching: ‘there must be in your mind no thoughts, no words, no imaginations. The sole sound will be the sound of your mantra. The mantra … is like a harmonic’ (Main 1999: 14).

There are also questions surrounding the Asian influences of Ken Wilber’s transpersonal theory on Keating’s theoretical reflections on levels of consciousness, his articulation of the unitive experience and his treatment of sin. Moreover, even Main’s use of the Sanskrit word ‘mantra’ to describe the prayer-word in Christian Meditation highlights the way in which contemporary Christian contemplative practices have been deeply influenced by non-Christian forms of meditation — to the point where one might argue that all future forms of Christian contemplation will be religious hybrids, to some degree or another. With the growing popularity of yoga in the west, such integrative tendencies will only become more pronounced.

Apart from the many current or lapsed or past Christians in the west who regularly practise different kinds of yoga taught through various contemporary postural yoga schools, there are some Christian groups which claim that the essentials of Yoga — breath work, posture and contemplative meditation — are separable from the religious aspects of Indian religions and so quite compatible with Christianity. These groups have integrated yoga practices with Christian prayer and doctrine, sometimes even excluding all reference to Indian scripture and teaching, such as in the case of Holy Yoga. Both Hindu and Christian authorities have responded with criticism of such formal appropriation, and with caution generally regarding Christian practices of yoga. They accuse integrative tendencies of ‘cultural misappropriation’, of improperly and even immorally stealing features of non-Christian religious traditions. Or they speak of the traditional practices of yoga being ‘commodified’ by contemporary business practices, mistreated as an economic item used primarily for material profit. This relates to ethical concerns surrounding the denial or neglect of ‘moral prerequisites’ in western yoga, which were always aspects of traditional Indian yoga schools, as well as of the classical sources of contemplation in the west. It is also associated with criticisms of the apparent narcissistic attachments to bodily effects present in many western appropriations, where practitioners maintain distorted preoccupation with their own physical attractiveness and achievements. Some Christian critiques go on to emphasise moral/spiritual hazards related to perceived occult dangers, as well as doctrinal differences associated with such religious syncretism, which might impact negatively on orthodox Christian belief and practice.

In response to such concerns, one can argue that many of them are misguided or unjustified, and one can point to the many apparent social and spiritual benefits of such interreligious dialogue and practice. But these criticisms highlight quite effectively the manner in which contemplative meditation in today’s world of rapid transportation, mass information, instant communication and religious freedom can no longer be read or comprehended in religious isolation. Moreover, that is to say nothing about the many interesting and significant parallels one finds in the dynamics of contemplation among certain Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish and
Muslim thinkers in the areas of contemplative exercises and types of experiences, as well as in the proposed resistances, difficulties and associated dangers. Such correspondences would seem to support rather natural coalescences of contemplative practice and theory among different religious traditions in postmodern developments, despite the immense historical, theological and contextual diversity.  

Notes

1. For a comprehensive study on various forms and models of prayer, see Chase (2005). For an account of historical/theological developments of prayer, see Hammerling (2008). For a more traditional understanding of the forms of prayer, see Cassian’s *Conferences* (1997: 323–363).


3. This goal of unceasing prayer follows St. Paul’s exhortation in *1 Thessalonians* 5:17.

4. See, for example, Polen (1994: 4–5 and 159, n. 14). Hasidic Rabbi Shapira outlines a practice of contemplative recollection in *Derekh ha-Melekh* (Jerusalem 1991), which he calls *hashkatah* (‘silencing of the conscious mind’) (5).

5. Two other influential books on recollection are Bernardino de Laredo’s *The Ascent of Mount Sion* (1535) and Bernabé de Palma’s *Via Spiritus* (1532). For brief descriptions of these works, see Short (2007: 450–455). Only the former is translated into English (by E. Allison Peers [1950]).

6. For Teresa’s discussion of this contemplative practice, see especially Teresa’s *Way of Perfection*, (1980: chs 28–31) and *Interior Castle* (1980), first and second mansions.

7. For Teresa, when vocal prayer is sincerely recited with deep and loving attentiveness to whom the prayer is addressed, one can attain contemplation. She writes, ‘it is very possible that while you are reciting the Our Father or some other vocal prayer, the Lord may raise you to perfect contemplation’ (1980: 130–131).

8. Underhill describes what she calls the dangers of mystical Quietism: ‘Pure passivity and indifference were its ideal. All activity was forbidden it, all choice was a negation of its surrender, all striving was unnecessary and wrong. It needed only to rest for evermore and “let God work and speak in the silence”’ (1990: 325). St. Teresa also mentions how some of her novices strive to stay immersed in this blissful condition: ‘It doesn’t seem to them that they are in the world, nor would they want to see or hear about anything other than their God’ (1980: 154). Underhill and Teresa insist the mystic needs to become open to other features of spiritual reality. For Teresa, the danger is to mistake a kind of self-isolated stupor for authentic communal rapture. Rapture is an advanced condition that involves more dynamic elements (1980: 333–334).

9. These comments on Underhill are adapted from Stoeber 2015, especially 38.

10. For a comprehensive and thorough study on the origin(s), history and method(s) of the prayers with the names of Jesus, including the Jesus Prayer, see Hausherr, (1978). His study shows how various short prayers with the name of Jesus started, developed and culminated in the current formula of the Jesus Prayer.

11. For a lively and informative contemporary account of the Jesus Prayer, see Mathewes-Green 2009.

12. Centering Prayer is supported by and spread through a worldwide organisation, named Contemplative Outreach. According to their website, it has more than 90 active chapters in 39 countries, supports more than 800 prayer groups and teaches Centering Prayer to more than 15,000 new people every year. See the website: www.contemplativeoutreach.org/about-us (accessed 8 January 2019).

13. Keating provides complete instruction in a two-page pamphlet, which is available on the website of Contemplative Outreach, whose goal is to promote Centering Prayer and to provide resources for it throughout the world. www.contemplativeoutreach.org/category/category/centering-prayer (accessed 28 December 2018).

14. Christian Meditation, which is supported by the World Community for Christian Meditation, has become a global practice, having spread to more than 120 countries, with approximately 3000 groups around the world. www.wccm.org/content/meditation-groups (accessed 28 December 2018).

In his writings, ‘meditation is the way of simplicity’ or similar statements frequently appear. The work of teaching meditation is, according to Main, ‘largely taken up with persuading people of the simplicity of meditation’ (Main 1982: 17–18).

This formal instruction ‘How to Meditate’ is found right after the ‘Contents’ of recently published books of John Main. For a slightly longer and different online version of the instruction, see www.wccm.org/content/how-meditate (accessed 28 December 2018).

The word maranatha is found in two places in the New Testament: 1 Corinthians 16:22 and Revelation 22:20. Main believes maranatha is ‘one of the earliest recorded Christian prayers’ (Freeman 1987: 6).


For a critical exploration of the possible influences of Asian meditation traditions on Centering Prayer and Christian Meditation, see Lee 2018, especially 92–139.

See, for example, Keating (1997: 27, 140–142, 73–74, 51, 13).

Such as: 3HO/Kundalini Yoga, Iyengar Yoga, Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga, Integral Yoga, Sivananda Yoga, Bihar Yoga and Bikram Yoga.

These groups include: Christians Practicing Yoga, (www.christianspracticingyoga.com/), Yoga Faith (https://yogafith.org/), Holy Yoga (https://holyyoga.net/), Yahweh Yoga (http://yahwehyoga.com/), and Christian Yoga Magazine (https://web.archive.org/web/20080814150734/http://christianyogamagazine.com/) (accessed 28 December 2018). See also the reference to these issues by Candy Gunther Brown in relation to yoga courses given at Wheaton College, a Christian evangelical school in Illinois. She describes the college’s position statement on this: ‘What redeems yoga at Wheaton is, first, that it is taught by Christians who have signed the Wheaton College Statement of Faith. Second, instructors subtract ‘ancient (and sometimes religious) words’ from pose descriptions and add Christian belief statements: at the start or end of class, they ‘lead a prayer, offer Scripture or a word of spiritual encouragement.’’ In her essay Guenther Brown explores questions of cultural appropriation and imperialism, as well as implications related to possible inter-religious influences and practices. Candy Gunther Brown, ‘Christian Yoga: Something New under the Sun’ (2018: 661).

These issues are adapted from Stoeber 2017, especially 5–9. See also Jain’s important work focusing on some of these issues, especially that of the cultural appropriation and misuse of yoga by non-Hindus and criticisms of yoga by certain evangelical Christians (2012: 1–8; 2015: 137–140).

See, for example, Bakic-Hayden 2008; Clooney 2013; Cole and Sambhi 1993: 139–150; Hisamatsu and Pattini 2015; Matus 1984; Molleur 2009; Justin O’Brien 1978: 23–40; Oden 2017; Stoeber 2015; Unno 2002; Washburn 1995, especially 153–167. Also, we should note in this context that there is some current research in neuroscience that argues there is cross-cultural evidence of a neurological substrate related to contemplative-mystical experience, in terms of corresponding specific electrochemical brain states (d’Aquili and Newberg 1999; Newberg et al. 2001).

Bibliography


Christianity and contemplation


Michael Stoeber and JaeGil Lee


